

Original March 24, 2018 column by NYT's Bret Stephens follows March 27, 2018 response letter by Philip Alston.

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Opinion | LETTERS

Bash the U.N.? There's Another Side to the Story

MARCH 27, 2018



John Bolton speaking to the media in 2006, when he was the American ambassador to the United Nations. Jason DeCrow/Associated Press

To the Editor:

Re "[John Bolton Is Right About the U.N.](#)," by Bret Stephens (column, March 24):

Bret Stephens begins and ends his assault on the United Nations by referring to its failure to acknowledge its responsibility for bringing cholera to Haiti and its failure to compensate the more than 10,000 victims who died.

He is right that it is scandalous, but what he doesn't mention is that it was the United States that pushed hardest to cover up the real source of cholera when it erupted in Haiti, and it was the United States that applied pressure to the secretary general to prevent an acknowledgment of responsibility and the setting up of the mechanism legally required when the responsibility of the United Nations concerns a private law matter.

If John Bolton, the new national security adviser, wants to set the United Nations right, he can begin by persuading President Trump and the secretary of state to immediately announce that the United States accepts that the United Nations was responsible for the cholera outbreak and that it should set up a mechanism to settle the victims' claims.

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Opinion | OP-ED COLUMNIST

John Bolton Is Right About the U.N.



Bret Stephens MARCH 23, 2018

A version of this op-ed appears in print on March 24, 2018, on Page A23 of the New York edition with the headline: John Bolton Is Right About The U.N.

In 1994, John Bolton said that if the United Nations Secretariat building in New York “lost 10 stories, it wouldn’t make a bit of difference.” The quote makes an appearance nearly every time Bolton’s critics compile a hit parade of his alleged infamies.

My question is: Why is the remark even controversial?

The U.N. is a never-ending scandal disguised as an everlasting hope. The hope is that dialogue can overcome distrust and collective security can be made to work in the interests of humanity. Reality says otherwise. Trust is established by deeds, not words. Collective security is a recipe for international paralysis or worse. Just ask the people of Aleppo.

As for the scandals — where to start? U.N. peacekeepers caused a cholera epidemic in Haiti that so far has taken 10,000 lives. Yet it took U.N. headquarters six years to acknowledge responsibility. An Associated Press investigation found “nearly 2,000 allegations of sexual abuse

and exploitation by peacekeepers and other personnel around the world” over a 12-year period, including 300 allegations involving children. “But only a fraction of the alleged perpetrators served jail time.”

In Rwanda in 1994, U.N. peacekeepers all-but abandoned the country at the outset of genocide that took at least 500,000 lives. In Bosnia in 1995, U.N. peacekeepers stepped aside in Srebrenica and allowed more than 7,000 men and boys to be killed and countless women raped. It’s a similar story in Sri Lanka in 2009 and South Sudan in 2016.

And then there are comparatively lesser scandals. Like Oil for Food, the multibillion-dollar program intended to feed hungry Iraqi children and used by Saddam Hussein in a kickback scheme involving a rogue’s gallery of international enablers. Or the use of U.N. schools in Gaza to store weapons aimed at Israel. Or the 2016 admission by a U.N. oversight body that some U.N. agencies “continue to remain in a state of near denial with regard to fraud.”

Confronted with the record of failure, U.N. defenders typically deflect and demand: the former, by pointing to the bad behavior of individual states as the cause of U.N. failures; the latter, by insisting that the U.N.’s core problem is a dearth of financial resources and legal authorities.

The arguments aren’t baseless. More permissive rules of engagement might have helped prevent some atrocities. Less obstructive behavior by Security Council members might have prevented others.

But they’re also misleading. Contrary to the belief that the U.N. runs on a shoestring, total expenditure for the U.N. system in 2016 was around \$49 billion. That’s up 22 percent since 2010. And the abuse of the U.N. system by states such as Russia to protect clients like Bashar al-Assad is a feature of the system, not a bug.

So is the chronic mismanagement. Two years ago, Anthony Banbury, a former assistant U.N. secretary general, wrote an op-ed for *The Times* explaining why he resigned his job. “I was unprepared for the blur of Orwellian admonitions and Carrollian logic that govern” U.N. headquarters, he recalled:

“If you locked a team of evil geniuses in a laboratory, they could not design a bureaucracy so maddeningly complex, requiring so much effort but in the end incapable of delivering the intended result. The system is a black hole into which disappear countless tax dollars and human aspirations, never to be seen again.”

And that’s from a self-described believer in the U.N.’s ideals and mission. But the truth of the U.N. is probably worse, since fixes to the system never seem to work.

The U.N. adopted what were supposed to be landmark reforms more than a decade ago. Yet the mismanagement, corruption, abuses and moral perversities remain. Iran sits on the executive board of the Commission on the Status of Women. The Syrian regime is represented on the U.N.’s Special Committee on Decolonization, dedicated to “respect for self-determination of all

peoples.” In October, Zimbabwe’s Robert Mugabe was named a good-will ambassador by the World Health Organization, until an outcry forced the director general to think better of it.

It is, of course, possible to dismiss all this as trivial — who cares who the WHO names as its good-will ambassador? If so, it attests to the truth of Bolton’s quip about the U.N. losing 10 floors. Fifteen might be better.

Except it isn’t trivial. “Imagine if the U.N. was going to the United States and raping children and bringing cholera,” Mario Joseph, a Haitian lawyer seeking compensation for the U.N.’s victims, told the A.P. “Human rights aren’t just for rich white people.” That point ought to resonate with the U.N.’s usual defenders, whose idealism rarely seems dented, and only occasionally informed, by experience.

In the meantime, we’ll all have a collective freak-out over the next national security adviser. I agree with Bolton about some things and disagree about others. But on the U.N. he’s been right all along. If his presence in the White House helps to scare the organization into real reform, so much the better.