

REJOINING THE WORLD

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Sixty years ago, it was the United States that advocated most eloquently for passage of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the first global expression of the inherent rights of all people. We were the richest and most powerful country on earth, and the problems of other nations seemed to have little practical bearing on our prosperity; nevertheless, the American commitment to multilateral solutions was bold and unwavering. Today, by contrast, many of our biggest challenges are clearly global in nature. Yet even as domestic policy has become more and more obviously intertwined with foreign policy, the United States has chosen to distance itself from international organizations and negotiations.

In one area of policy after another, the Bush administration has taken a go-it-alone approach, to the shame of our country and the dismay of the rest of the world. Climate change is an obvious and appalling example. Policies that encourage sprawl and runaway consumption here at home lead to higher temperatures and water levels in Myanmar and Miami alike. As the largest greenhouse-gas emitter, the United States bears a special burden of responsibility. Yet, over the past eight years, Washington has stood conspicuously apart from global climate negotiations. As a result, the United States itself now looms as a huge barrier to progress in convincing poorer countries to adopt more sustainable practices. On economic questions, the administration has consistently carried the water for private capital, leading to policies that have lowered wages, widened the chasm between rich and poor, and left millions with little choice but to migrate (from rural areas to cities, from one country to another) in pursuit of a more secure life. On the national security front, the administration took a concern shared by many nations - terrorism - and turned it into an American-branded war

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of us against an ill-defined them. Through blatant disregard for suspects' rights and the rule of law, American leaders have alienated many of our natural allies.

This new unilateralism has deepened our problems and diminished the U.S. position as a global leader. For our own sake and the world's, the next administration should act quickly to chart a new course of global cooperation. The United States must reengage with international institutions and conventions, while, at the same time, reasserting the public interest over the corporate interest and honoring the links between our national well-being and international development, human rights, and the environment. A new approach in just four areas—the United Nations, trade, the environment, and food policy—would send a strong message to the international community that the United States has decided to rejoin the global community.

At the United Nations, we stand near the back of the line when it comes to ratifying international treaties and conventions. Through prompt action on just a few of the many pending agreements that protect workers, children, women and the environment, the next administration can signal its readiness to help revive the United Nations as a tool for solving global problems and keeping the peace.

Over a span of decades, American leaders have aggressively pushed a corporate-led free trade model rooted in the twin principles of deregulation and privatization. Through the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and other trade pacts, recent U.S. policy has increased economic growth for large multinational corporations at the expense of workers, farmers and the environment on both ends of our trading relationships. Trade agreements should support social, economic and environmental goals. They should operate within international conventions that protect the public interest. The next administration must provide a new vision for trade that puts people, communities, and the environment first.

The current food crisis requires immediate attention. In mid-2007, before prices shot up, an estimated 850 million people lived in a state of crippling hunger, which the United Nations defines as continuously getting too little food to maintain a healthy and minimally active life. Another 50 million have now joined those ranks, and the number will continue to grow if the current pattern of food-price volatility continues, as many predict it will. Three quarters of the world's extremely poor people - 1.2 billion of us - live and work in rural areas where agriculture is the dominant sector of the economy. But decades of underinvestment in agriculture, combined with the "free trade" and deregulation thrust of U.S. policy, have turned countries that used to produce their own food into net food importers. Today, many of the world's largest agricultural producers, including the United States itself, face acute water shortages in vital areas of arable land. Our industrial, export-oriented brand of agriculture is deeply dependent on oil and strongly linked to high greenhouse gas emissions. Whole new agricultural systems are needed—systems that support local food needs, can withstand climate change, and maintain the health of the land and natural resources on which our food system depends. Better agricultural, financial and food aid policies could protect people against price volatility and scarcity.

In the postwar decades, the United States led the way in creating a multilateral order. The World Bank; the International Monetary Fund; the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (later to become the World Trade Organization); the U.N. Declaration on Human Rights; and, of course, the United Nations itself - American leaders were present at the birth of all these enduring institutions, which were intended to facilitate international cooperation in law, human rights, economic development, social progress and global security. Those same principles are a good starting point for American policy today. The economy, our food system, the environment and security - all call for global solutions, which can only emerge from a renewed commitment to international cooperation.

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GLOBAL IDEAS

THE U.S. AND THE U.N.: A TIME FOR RECONCILIATION

Most Americans believe that the United Nations plays an important part in the world and would like to see its powers increased, despite justified criticism of its inability to effectively deal with human rights abuses and international peacekeeping needs. In fact, today's United Nations is a far cry from the organization envisioned by world leaders at its founding in San Francisco in 1945. That is true, in large part, because the Bush administration has abandoned the United Nations as the primary locus of global cooperation. By slashing funding, ignoring rules, refusing to join new institutions such as the International Criminal Court and appointing a U.N. Ambassador who was openly hostile to the institution, the administration has sought to undercut the United Nations at nearly every turn. A renewed U.S. commitment could both help solve global problems and improve the effectiveness of the institution.

The first challenge is to rebuild trust with other U.N. members. The new administration should begin by paying its back dues. It should appoint a U.N. ambassador with stature—and with a strong commitment to internationalism and an explicit mandate to help make the United Nations more effective, including steps to improve its efficiency and financial accounting practices. The next ad-

ministration should actively support a fairer decision-making process within international bodies, particularly those dealing with global trade and finance, so that all countries, not just the biggest or most intransigent, have a voice. Through these first steps, the next administration can establish its credibility – and the nation's – as a sincere partner in the pursuit of a more engaged and enlightened multilateral system.

The next big step will be to support the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the U.N. treaty system that serves as a framework for human and social rights. The United States has signed on to the MDGs, which range from halving extreme poverty to halting the spread of HIV/AIDS to providing universal primary education, all by 2015, but has done little to support them. By ratifying several important treaties, we can help restore our credibility as a supporter of international human rights. Those treaties include the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the conventions on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and on the Rights of the Child.



PROTECTING OUR COMMON ENVIRONMENT

Environmental challenges demand global action. The United States has lagged behind the rest of the world in supporting the U.N. treaty system to protect the environment. The new administration should create a presidential Office of the U.S. Representative on Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs) that would have a mandate comparable to the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative, and a concomitant budget and staffing level. This new position would work with the UN and the U.S. Congress to find global solutions to urgent problems. High on the list of environmental treaties for the U.S. to join are the Kyoto Protocol and the U.N. Convention on Biological Diversity.

Through its failure to ratify the Kyoto Protocol to the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the United States has undermined its ability to participate in climate discussions. This country needs to ratify Kyoto immediately, and then focus on the Copenhagen commitments now being negotiated and expected to take effect in December 2009. As part of these global climate negotiations, the United States should be a leader in committing to greater reductions in greenhouse gas emissions among developed countries. We should also take a leadership role in helping developing countries address the economic hardships that result from rising oil prices and natural disasters.

The U.S. signed but never ratified the U.N. Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). The new administration should work with Congress to ratify this important agreement as well as the related Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, which recognizes the “precautionary principle.” Under the precautionary principle, when an action or policy could potentially cause serious or irreversible harm to public health or the environment, that action or policy will not be allowed, despite the absence of full scientific certainty on the matter. The principle recognizes that waiting for scientific proof sometimes means waiting too long.

A TRADE POLICY FOR PEOPLE, COMMUNITIES AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Through regional treaties like NAFTA, and during international trade negotiations at the World Trade Organization, the Bush administration has aggressively pushed a corporatized free trade agenda. Several recent polls show that the American public opposes the current free trade model and is ready for a new set of trade rules that reflect the public interest.



The recently introduced TRADE Act, officially titled the “Trade, Accountability, Development and Employment Act of 2008,” provides an excellent blueprint for a new fair trade system. The TRADE Act was introduced on June 4, 2008 by Sen. Sherrod Brown (D-Ohio) and Rep. Mike Michaud (D-Maine). It is supported by labor, consumer, environmental, family farm and faith groups and more than 50 co-sponsors in the House and the Senate. The TRADE Act goes further than providing a congressional space to review trade deals that are not working. It lists components that should be included and excluded from U.S. trade agreements so as to protect the environment, workers and communities. The TRADE Act also strengthens the role of Congress by allowing members to review and renegotiate existing trade agreements, such as NAFTA, in order to ensure they are in compliance with sustainable development goals. As well, it empowers Congress to require that all future trade agreements comply with its provisions. A new administration should work closely with Congress to use the TRADE Act as the basis for a new fair trade policy.



GLOBAL FOOD SECURITY

The United States is an indispensable player in the work of stabilizing global food prices and preventing starvation. We are one of the world’s largest agricultural producers and set global prices for several key commodities. The United States is also the largest giver of food aid in the world, but does it badly. The new administration should use a global food sovereignty lens to assess its food and agriculture policies. At the global level, food sovereignty implies two related but distinct concerns: the right of countries to determine and implement their own food security policies, and the responsibility of all countries to protect every person’s human right to food, as set out in the UN Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Four actions could go a long way toward that goal:

- Support for a Global Food Convention. The U.S. should provide leadership within the UN in building towards a Global Food Convention, which would serve as a legal framework to address food sovereignty and the agricultural dimensions of climate change. The goal would be to establish binding commitments for all UN governments, with a strong framework for use by local and regional authorities. With a Global Food Convention supported by a multi-stakeholder international commission, governments would have sovereignty to define their own
- Food sovereignty as a cornerstone of trade policy: Instead of a narrow focus on forcing open markets in other countries, the United States should advocate for rules that respect the right of all countries to safeguard their food sovereignty through support for farmers and agriculture, border measures and food reserves.
- A strategic grain reserve: The next administration should act quickly to establish farmer-held grain reserves, and should initiate a global dialogue on building a network of reserves around the world to stabilize global grain prices. Food reserves should be complemented by border measures to ensure that local prices are not destabilized by dumped imports.
- Regulation of commodity markets: Commodity speculation is one of the main drivers of price volatility - one that can and must be controlled. It is in everyone’s interest to ensure that food and agriculture markets can function properly, reflecting actual supply and demand. Speculation confuses the signals and contributes directly to hunger.
- Reformed - and increased - foreign aid: While the United States has promised to spend a mini-

food and agricultural policies, but would be held accountable to international environmental and human rights, including the Right to Food.

num of 0.7 percent of its Gross National Product on overseas development assistance, today it spends less than 0.2 percent. The new administration should move toward a cabinet-level Department of Global Development that works with Congress to coordinate foreign assistance programs, with a new focus on eradicating hunger and poverty, improving education and health, and helping countries reach the Millennium Development Goals. U.S. food aid programs urgently need reform. These programs are inefficient, expensive and untimely, and too often hurt local food markets in recipient countries. Instead, we should build on efforts initiated by President Bush toward programs that are free from requirements to source or handle the food in the U.S., and give priority to cash-based over in-kind donations so recipient countries can source food locally. This flexibility allows assistance to be delivered quickly to those who need it most. Food aid should work with international cooperation programs to build support for local food systems in developing countries.

