Calling the Shots: How Washington Dominates Today's UN

Phyllis Bennis
Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press, 2000. 341 pages.

While many Americans are just becoming aware of the United States' extraordinary dominance over the UN, Phyllis Bennis has long been a "prophet," warning of the catastrophic consequences of its disproportionate influence over this international body. A prolific writer, whose published works include *Beyond the Storm: A Gulf Crisis Reader* and *Altered States: A Reader in the New World Order* (Interlink: 1999. Edited with Michael Moushabeck), Bennis' signature work, *Calling the Shots* (Interlink: 1998. Edited with Michael Moushabeck), was initially pub-

lished by Olive Branch Press in 1996 and revised in 2000. "The latter edition examines US-UN relations at the close of the 20th century and suggests possible ways forward for the world body," according to its back cover promotional endorsements.

The 341-page book has 11 chapters: "The Founders," "The History," "Center Stage: The Role and Power of the UN in Washington's Gulf War," "Who Rules: The Struggle for UN Democracy," "Peacekeeping, Intervention, and a Whole New World Out There," "Washington Keeps Its Own Peace," "Peacekeeping Goes to War: Somalia, Rwanda, Haiti, Bosnia," "UN Sanctions: The Not-Quite Warfare," "To the World's Attention," "The Exception: The Middle East and Palestine," "Democratizing the UN," and "The Laws of Empire and the UN's New Internationalism." This is followed by a 19-page appendix entitled "The United Nations Charter and Principal Organs of the UN."

In the introduction to the new edition, Denis Halliday, the former UN assistant secretary-general who resigned in protest over the UN's humanitarian failures in Iraq, states that Bennis "forces the reader to question the very origins of the UN organization, something many of us would perhaps not prefer to face at this late date in history." He adds that "it is unsettling to be reminded that the United Nations of ours, with its Charter of high ideals, is built on the vested interests of a very few."

In her original introduction, Bennis paid significant attention to the American-Iraqi conflict. She stated that "what Washington did was to plan, arm, and launch the Pentagon's own war against Iraq using the UN's credential as a multilateral shield, while spin-doctors hailed the 'international coalition' against Saddam Hussein. What the U.S. didn't do was to share actual decision-making authority, either strategic or operational, with the UN, or even with the so-called 'coalition.'"

Emphasizing this dominance, Bennis quotes John Bolton, the former under-secretary of state for International Organizations under President George Bush senior, speaking at a Global Structures Convocation, in Washington, DC, on February 1994: "There is no United Nations. There is an international community that occasionally can be led by the only real power left in the world, and that is the United States, when it suits our interest, and when we can get others to go along …"

Bennis builds her strong case against the dominance of the UN by the victors of the two world wars. She cites the UN's predecessor, the League of Nations, founded after WWI, and the fact that it failed to create a more harmonious world and allowed the rise of fascism, leading to WWII. She

also focuses upon the dominance of the North's primary industrial countries (Europe and North America), which she cites as "the cornerstone of a five-power alliance which includes the US, the Soviets, the French, the British and the Chinese."

In her early chapters, she also covers the historical development of the South, which came to prominence in 1955 with the convening of the Bandung Conference in Indonesia of non-aligned nations. In Chapter 3, "Who Rules: The Struggle for UN Democracy," Bennis goes to the heart of her concerns about how the democratic principles upon which the UN was supposedly founded are being undermined. She writes: "According to one non-aligned diplomat with many years experience at the UN, U.S. control emerges partly though what he terms 'psychological pressure on the South.' Some of the pressure emerges from U.S. control over the Bretton Woods institutions. 'Sometimes all it takes [is] for a poor country's ambassador to be asked, pointedly, 'Don't you have a loan pending?' for them to get the message."

Turning to the Middle East, Bennis illustrates the pressure that the US has been able to apply on developing countries, including significant Arab states. She notes that "as part of its post-Desert Storm diplomatic offensive, Washington promised its Israeli allies that a key goal of its agenda would be the scrapping of the 1975 General Assembly resolution identifying political Zionism as a form of racism …" "What was telling," she writes, was "the number of Arab countries whose ambassadors ducked out of the Assembly hall or refused to participate in the vote" to rescind the resolution. She lists Bahrain, Egypt, Kuwait, Morocco, Oman, and Tunisia as being among them. These countries, she says, also supported the U.S. during the Gulf war and had "a realistic hope of significant upgrades in political, military, or economic aid from Washington."

Elsewhere, Bennis highlights the conflicting approaches of the North and the South to international conflicts. In Chapter 6, on the section about Bosnia, "The New World Order Fails the Test," Bennis notes that "when one looks at the U.S.-UN relationship in Bosnia, it looks very different from other arenas of UN crisis-area peacekeeping because the UN was not the sole multilateral tool of the U.S. and its allies. In Bosnia, the UN was used as an instrument of U.S.-European policy, but without being imbued with U.S.-Euphoria power." "The bottom line of the Bosnia policy of the Northern powers – of France, Britain, but most especially of the U.S. – was to satisfy domestic political demands and appear to be 'doing something' while in fact doing as little as possible and risking even less."

Bennis' final chapter, "The Laws of Empire," presages the current UN crisis and conflicts between contending European powers. Her final caution to the U.S. is: "Being the richest and most powerful nation in the world does not give the U.S. the right to trample international law, to run endgames around the UN, to use or discard the global organization at the whim of super-power arrogance or caprice of domestic politics. At the turn of the twenty-first century, the world has had enough of empires writing their own rules."

Imam Ghayth Nur Kashif
Masjidush Shura
Washington, DC