groups fulfill which functions and where there are significant gaps and needs in the conservation community.


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At the age of sixty, the United Nations (UN) is engaged in the most intensive introspection since its establishment in 1945. There is a sense that never before in its history has the UN needed to make bold changes and that they are possible. Adding to intense public scrutiny arising from the oil-for-food scandal and sexual misconduct by UN peacekeepers, three other recent events have kept the UN in the forefront of public debate in this country. One is the controversy surrounding the appointment and later replacement of John Bolton as the U.S. ambassador to the UN. A second is the release in 2005 of a bipartisan report by a task force on UN reform, headed by former Speaker Newt Gingrich and former Senator George Mitchell. And the third involves efforts in the last Congress, especially the adoption of the Henry J. Hyde United Nations Reform Act by the House of Representatives, to withdraw American funding from the UN unless far-reaching management and oversight reforms were undertaken.

Despite all this recent attention, however, people in the United States are poorly informed about the mission, structure, and functioning of the only organization where all nations can address issues of common concern, devise solutions, and commit to their implementation. In this context, this book is a valuable reference for “those who want to know more, who ask how the proceedings are conceived, prepared, and paid for, and about their chances for a lasting impact” (p. xi).

Fasulo tries to provide a fresh look into the functioning of the UN as a global body, its strengths and weaknesses, and prospects for its future. She is well-qualified to do this by virtue of having been the UN correspondent

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for National Public Radio. She brings into play in the book candid interviews with prominent insiders, including former American ambassadors, a former Canadian Ambassador to the UN, and senior UN officials, such as Mark Malloch Brown. Although some of her interviewees are openly critical of the organization, Fasulo remains decidedly positive and hopeful about the UN.

Accessible and concise, the book is a valuable guide to the UN family, including the Security Council, General Assembly, Secretariat, International Criminal Court, and the various agencies, funds, and programs. Twenty-six short chapters steer the reader through the maze of documents, structures, and processes of the United Nations. The logical order of the first two-thirds of the book is hard to pin down, however, as the chapters jump from a review of the General Assembly (ch. 7) to “Coordination to Fight International Terrorism” (ch. 8), from analysis of UN Finances (ch. 12) to a “Tour of UN Headquarters” (ch. 13) and “The Coup against Boutros-Ghali” (ch. 14). The last third of the book (chs. 20–26) systematically addresses the role and performance of key UN agencies across a set of six functional issues: human rights, economic and social development, the environment, disaster relief, control of toxins and nuclear materials, and globalization.

The book covers a lot of ground in two-hundred pages. The text adopts a journalistic style and is supplemented with text boxes containing short biographical sketches, figures, and excerpts of key resolutions. Some academic readers will be disappointed that the book does not try to be more than a guide, and will miss extensive references and in-depth treatment of functional issue areas.

Readers of the Journal, for example, will likely find the environmental chapter (ch. 22) inadequate and unconvincing in the way it heralds successes but fails to come to grips with the challenges. The chapter also fails to mention the convention secretariats, the Commission on Sustainable Development, and the Global Environment Facility, all of which are key actors in global environmental governance. The short review of the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) has no basic human resources and budget statistics, although they are provided for every other agency covered in the book. In addition, readers will ask why this chapter begins with the Earth Summit of 1992 and the Kyoto Protocol of 1997 but ignores the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment. This last event not only put the environment on the global political agenda but created the institutional architecture for environmental governance that is under reform today.

Despite such omissions, the book is a particularly relevant resource for the general reader in the current debates on the past performance and future role of the UN. Calls for reform have focused on greater effectiveness and efficiency, better transparency and accountability, and stronger oversight mechanisms.
Though much remains to be done on effectiveness, Fasulo argues that "the UN has helped create a framework for civilized behavior in all aspects of life" (p. 101) through conventions, treaties, standard setting, and the acceptance of common legal and ethical principles. She thinks that the UN has promoted peace and security in the world by helping to prevent another major war among nations. It has been ineffective, however, in resolving conflicts within nation states. Fasulo also credits the various UN agencies for improving health across the globe, resettling refugees, protecting endangered species, reducing pollution, establishing legal mechanisms for protection of human rights, and devising international standards for postal services, air traffic, satellites, and intellectual property. These achievements have come despite a glacial pace of decisionmaking, the lowest common denominator dynamic, favoritism, excessive politicization, and poor management—all of which have opened the UN to serious criticisms and calls for fundamental reform.

The UN also stands accused of opaque political processes, both by the insiders interviewed for the book and by outside analysts. Although transparency is critical to the legitimacy of an international organization, effectiveness often hinges on targeted efforts in smaller groups and coalitions. By the time negotiations become public, everything has been settled, rehearsed, and polished, Fasulo contends. The formal, open settings, Fasulo's interviewees emphasize, are good for sending signals but "nothing really happens there" (p. 98). They point out that real negotiations occur in informal group talks, in the hallways, backrooms, and behind closed doors. The most serious and important business is done "ostensibly in the open but actually in private" (p. 97), often over dinner or drinks. Indeed, one of the real values of this book is the way it dispels the myth that the functioning of the UN can be understood in terms of nation states rather than the individuals who make up the organization. "People really do matter at the UN," one observer asserts and in reality "anything that happens at the UN happens because of certain individuals" (p. 90).

The other side of this coin, of course, is that accountability mechanisms at the UN are crucial and under pressure from the United States a number of oversight mechanisms were created in the 1990s, the most prominent being the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS), which is responsible for internal audits, investigations, inspections, monitoring, and evaluation. The effectiveness of these accountability mechanisms, however, has been constrained by dependence for resources on the bodies being audited, which helps explain the failure to successfully audit the Oil-for-Food program, and by what the Gingrich-Mitchell report called an absurd level of member state micromanagement.

The UN Charter envisioned a world organization that would be more than the sum of its parts and would rise above narrowly defined national self-interests. While its principles and purposes nobly sought to reflect the
aspirations of “we, the peoples” rather than “we, the governments,” the organization has lost its ideals, staff morale has plummeted, and the initial sense of common purpose has given way to power politics, cynical rhetoric, and public posturing. But why has this happened? Why have we not lived up to the vision in the Charter of sixty years ago? Why has the system lost legitimacy? And what can be done about it? Fasulo’s book is a good starting point and travel guide for students who want to try to find the answers to these questions by delving into the workings of the only international organization we have with the mandate to solve “problems without borders.” And as they think about the future of the UN they should keep in mind Richard Holbrooke’s admonition. The UN, he said, “is the flawed but indispensable institution that we have two choices with: weaken it by undermining it or try to strengthen it by getting it to correct its flaws” (p. 106). Which choice we make and how we carry it out will determine what world we live in.