

Denis Halliday: A Voice of Reason in an Insane World

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[Denis Halliday](#) is an exceptional figure in the world of diplomacy. In 1998, after a 34-year career with the United Nations—including as an Assistant Secretary-General and the UN Humanitarian Coordinator in Iraq—he resigned when the UN Security Council refused to lift sanctions against Iraq.

Halliday saw at first hand the devastating impact of this policy that had led to the deaths of over [500,000 children](#) under the age of five and hundreds of thousands more older children and adults, and he called the sanctions a genocide against the people of Iraq.

Since 1998, Denis has been a powerful voice for peace and for human rights around the world. He sailed in the [Freedom Flotilla](#) to Gaza in 2010, when 10 of his companions on a Turkish ship were shot and killed in an attack by the Israeli armed forces.

I interviewed Denis Halliday from his home in Ireland.



Nicolas Davies: So, Denis, twenty years after you resigned from the UN over the sanctions on Iraq, the United States is now imposing similar “[maximum pressure](#)” sanctions against Iran, Venezuela, Cuba and North Korea, denying their people access to food and medicines in the midst of a pandemic. What would you like to say to Americans about the real-world impact of these policies?

Denis Halliday: I'd like to begin with explaining that the sanctions imposed by the Security Council against Iraq, led very much by the United States and Britain, were unique in the sense that they were comprehensive. They were open-ended, meaning that they required a Security Council decision to end them, which of course never actually happened – and they followed immediately upon the Gulf War.

The Gulf War, led primarily by the United States but supported by Britain and some others, undertook the bombing of Iraq and targeted civilian infrastructure, which is a violation of the Geneva Conventions, and they took out all electric power networks in the country.

This completely undermined the water treatment and distribution system of Iraq, which depended upon electricity to drive it, and drove people to use contaminated water from the Tigris and the Euphrates. That was the beginning of the death-knell for young children, because mothers were not breast-feeding, they were feeding their children with child formula, but mixing it with foul water from the Tigris and the Euphrates.

That bombing of infrastructure, including communications systems and electric power, wiped out the production of food, horticulture, and all of the other basic necessities of life. They also closed down exports and imports, and they made sure that Iraq was unable to export its oil, which was the main source of its revenue at the time.

In addition to that, they introduced a new weapon called depleted uranium, which was used by the U.S. forces driving the Iraqi Army out of Kuwait. That was used again in southern Iraq in the Basra area, and led to a massive accumulation of nuclear debris which led to leukemia in children, and that took three, four or five years to become evident.



So when I got to Iraq in 1998, the hospitals in Baghdad, and also of course in Basra and other cities, were full of children suffering from leukemia. Meantime adults had gotten their own cancer, mainly not a blood cancer diagnosis. Those children, we reckon perhaps 200,000 children, died of leukemia. At the same time, Washington and London withheld some of the treatment components that leukemia requires, again, it seemed, in a genocidal manner, denying Iraqi children the right to remain alive.

And as you quoted 500,000, that was a statement made by Madeleine Albright, the then American Ambassador to the United Nations who, live on CBS, was asked the question about the loss of 500,000 children, and she said that the loss of 500,000 children was "[worth it](#)," in terms of bringing down Saddam Hussein, which did not happen until the military invasion of 2003.

So the point is that the Iraqi sanctions were uniquely punitive and cruel and prolonged and comprehensive. They remained in place no matter how people like myself or others, and not just me alone, but UNICEF and the agencies of the UN system – many states including France, China and Russia – complained bitterly about the consequences on human life and the lives of Iraqi children and adults.

My desire in resigning was to go public, which I did. Within one month, I was in Washington doing my first Congressional briefing on the consequences of these sanctions, driven by Washington and London.

So I think the United States and its populus, who vote these governments in, need to understand that the children and the people of Iraq are just like the children of the United States and England and their people. They have the same dreams, same ambitions of education and employment and housing and vacations and all the things that good people care about. We're all the same people and we cannot sit back and think somehow, "We don't know who they are, they're Afghans, they're Iranians, they're Iraqis. So what? They're dying. Well, we don't know, it's not our problem, this happens in war." I mean, all that sort of rationale as to why this is unimportant.

And I think that aspect of life in the sanctions world continues, whether it's Venezuela, whether it's Cuba, which has been ongoing now for 60 years. People are not aware or don't think in terms of the lives of other human beings identical to ourselves here in Europe or in the United States.

It's a frightening problem, and I don't know how it can be resolved. We now have sanctions on Iran and North Korea. So the difficulty is to bring alive that we kill people with sanctions. They're not a substitute for war – they are a form of warfare.

Nicolas Davies: Thank you, Denis. I think that brings us to another question, because whereas the sanctions on Iraq were approved by the UN Security Council, what we're looking at today in the world is, for the most part, the U.S. using the power of its financial system to impose [unilateral sieges](#) on these countries, even as the U.S. is also still waging war in at least half a dozen countries, mostly in the Greater Middle East. Medea Benjamin and I recently [documented](#) that the U.S. and its allies have dropped 326,000 bombs and missiles on other countries in all these wars, just since 2001 – that's not counting the First Gulf War.

You worked for the UN and UNDP for 34 years, and the UN was conceived of as a forum and an institution for peace and to confront violations of peace by any countries around the world. But how can the UN address the problem of a powerful, aggressive country like the United States that systematically violates international law and then abuses its veto and diplomatic power to avoid accountability?

Denis Halliday: Yes, when I talk to students, I try to explain that there are two United Nations: there's a United Nations of the Secretariat, led by the Secretary-General and staffed by people like myself and 20,000 or 30,000 more worldwide, through UNDP and the agencies. We operate in every country, and most of it is developmental or humanitarian. It's good work, it has real impact, whether it's feeding Palestinians or it's UNICEF work in Ethiopia. This continues.

Where the UN collapses is in the Security Council, in my view, and that is because, in Yalta

in 1945, Roosevelt, Stalin and Churchill, having noted the failure of the League of Nations, decided to set up a United Nations that would have a controlling entity, which they then called the Security Council. And to make sure that worked, in their interests I would say, they established this five-power veto group, and they added France and they added China. And that five is still in place.

That's 1945 and this is 2021, and they're still in power and they're still manipulating the United Nations. And as long as they stay there and they manipulate, I think the UN is doomed. The tragedy is that the five veto powers are the very member states that violate the Charter, violate human rights conventions, and will not allow the application of the ICC to their war crimes and other abuses.

On top of that, they are the countries that manufacture and sell weapons, and we know that weapons of war are possibly the most profitable product you can produce. So their vested interest is control, is the military capacity, is interference. It's a neocolonial endeavor, an empire in reality, to control the world as the way they want to see it. Until that is changed and those five member states agree to dilute their power and play an honest role, I think we're doomed. The UN has no capacity to stop the difficulties we're faced with around the world.

Nicolas Davies: That's a pretty damning prognosis. In this century, we're facing such incredible problems, between climate change and the threat of nuclear war still hanging over all of us, possibly more dangerous than ever before, because of the lack of treaties and the lack of cooperation between the nuclear powers, notably the U.S. and Russia. This is really an [existential crisis](#) for humanity.

Now there is also, of course, the UN General Assembly, and they did step up on nuclear weapons with the new Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons ([TPNW](#)), which has now officially entered into force. And every year when it meets, the General Assembly regularly and almost unanimously [condemns](#) the U.S. sanctions regime against Cuba.

When I wrote my book about the war in Iraq, my final recommendations were that the senior American and British war criminals responsible for the war should be held criminally accountable, and that the U.S. and the U.K. should pay reparations to Iraq for the war. Could the General Assembly possibly be a venue to build support for Iraq to claim reparations from the U.S. and the U.K., or is there another venue where that would be more appropriate?

Denis Halliday: I think you're right on target. The tragedy is that the decisions of the Security Council are binding decisions. Every member state has got to apply and respect those decisions. So, if you violate a sanctions regime imposed by the Council as a member state, you're in trouble. The General Assembly resolutions are not binding.

You've just referred to a very important decision, which is the decision about nuclear weapons. We've had a lot of decisions on banning various types of weapons over the years. Here in Ireland we were involved in anti-personnel mines and other things of that sort, and it was by a large number of member states, but not the guilty parties, not the Americans, not the Russians, not the Chinese, not the British. The ones who control the veto power game are the ones who do not comply. Just like Clinton was one of the proposers, I think, of the ICC [International Criminal Court], but when it came to the end of the day, the United States doesn't accept it has a role vis-a-vis themselves and their war crimes. The same is true of other large states that are the guilty parties in those cases.

So I would go back to your suggestion about the General Assembly. It could be enhanced, there's no reason why it couldn't be changed, but it requires tremendous courage on the part of member states. It also requires acceptance by the five veto powers that their day has come to an end, because, in reality, the UN carries very little cachet nowadays to send a UN mission into a country like Myanmar or Afghanistan.

I think we have no power left, we have no influence left, because they know who runs the organization, they know who makes the decisions. It's not the Secretary-General. It's not people like me. We are dictated to by the Security Council. I resigned, effectively, from the Security Council. They were my bosses during that particular period of my career.

I have a lecture I do on reforming the Security Council, making it a North-South representative body, which would find Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa in situ, and you'd get very different decisions, you'd get the sort of decisions we get in the General Assembly: much more balanced, much more aware of the world and its North and South and all those other variations. But of course, again, we can't reform the Council until the five veto powers agree to that. That is the huge problem.

Nicolas Davies: Yes, in fact, when that structure was announced in 1945 with the Security Council, the five Permanent Members and the veto, Albert Camus, who was the editor of the French Resistance newspaper *Combat*, wrote a front-page editorial saying this was the end of any idea of international democracy.

So, as with so many other issues, we live in these nominally democratic countries, but the people of a country like the United States are only really told what our leaders want us to know about how the world works. So reform of the Security Council is clearly needed, but it's a massive process of education and democratic reform in countries around the world to actually build enough of a popular movement to demand that kind of change. In the meantime, the problems we're facing are enormous.

Another thing that is very under-reported in the U.S. is that, out of desperation after twenty years of war in Afghanistan, Secretary Blinken has finally [asked the UN](#) to lead a peace process for a ceasefire between the U.S.-backed government and the Taliban and a political transition. That could move the conflict into the political realm and end the civil war that resulted from the U.S. invasion and occupation and endless bombing campaign.

So what do you think of that initiative? There is supposed to be a meeting in a couple of weeks in Istanbul, led by an experienced UN negotiator, Jean Arnault, who helped to bring peace to Guatemala at the end of its civil war, and then between Colombia and the FARC. The U.S. specifically asked China, Russia and Iran to be part of this process as well. Both sides in Afghanistan have agreed to come to Istanbul and at least see what they can agree on. So is that a constructive role that the UN can play? Does that offer a chance of peace for the people of Afghanistan?

Denis Halliday: If I were a member of the Taliban and I was asked to negotiate with a government that is only in power because it's supported by the United States, I would question whether it's an even keel. Are we equally powerful, can we talk to each other one-to-one? The answer, I think, is no.

The UN chap, whoever he is, poor man, is going to have the same difficulty. He is representing the United Nations, a Security Council dominated by the United States and

others, as the Afghans are perfectly well aware. The Taliban have been fighting for a helluva long time, and making no progress because of the interference of the U.S. troops, which are still on the ground. I just don't think it's an even playing-field.

So I'd be very surprised if that works. I absolutely hope it might. I would think, in my view, if you want a lasting relationship within a country, it's got to be negotiated within the country, without military or other interference or fear of further bombing or attacks or all the rest of it. I don't think we have any credibility, as a UN, under those circumstances. It'll be a very tough slog.

Nicolas Davies: Right. The irony is that the United States [set aside](#) the UN Charter when it attacked Yugoslavia in 1999 to carve out what is now the [semi-recognized](#) country of Kosovo, and then to attack Afghanistan and Iraq. The [UN Charter](#), right at the beginning, at its heart, prohibits the threat or use of force by one country against another. But that is what the U.S. set aside.

Denis Halliday: And then, you have to remember, the U.S. is attacking a fellow member state of the United Nations, without hesitation, with no respect for the Charter. Perhaps people forget that Eleanor Roosevelt drove, and succeeded in establishing, the Declaration of Human Rights, an extraordinary achievement, which is still valid. It's a biblical instrument for many of us who work in the UN.

So the neglect of the Charter and the spirit of the Charter and the wording of the Charter, by the five veto members, perhaps in Afghanistan it was Russia, now it's the United States, the Afghans have had foreign intervention up to their necks and beyond, and the British have been involved there since the 18th century almost. So they have my deepest sympathy, but I hope this thing can work, let's hope it can.

Nicolas Davies: I brought that up because the U.S., with its dominant military power after the end of the Cold War, made a very conscious choice that instead of living according to the UN Charter, it would live by the sword, by the law of the jungle: "might makes right."

It took those actions because it could, because no other military force was there to stand up against it. At the time of the First Gulf War, a [Pentagon consultant](#) told the New York Times that, with the end of the Cold War, the U.S. could finally conduct military operations in the Middle East without worrying about starting World War III. So they took the demise of the Soviet Union as a green light for these systematic, widespread actions that violate the UN Charter.

But now, what is happening in Afghanistan is that the Taliban once again control half the country. We're approaching the spring and the summer when the fighting traditionally gets worse, and so the U.S. is calling in the UN out of desperation because, frankly, without a ceasefire, their government in Kabul is just going to [lose more territory](#). So the U.S. has chosen to live by the sword, and in this situation it's now confronting dying by the sword.

Denis Halliday: What's tragic, Nicolas, is that, in our lifetime, the Afghans ran their own country. They had a monarchy, they had a parliament - I met and interviewed women ministers from Afghanistan in New York - and they managed it. It was when the Russians interfered, and then the Americans interfered, and then Bin Laden set up his camp there, and that was justification for destroying what was left of Afghanistan.



And then Bush, Cheney and a few of the boys decided, although there was no justification whatsoever, to bomb and destroy Iraq, because they wanted to think that Saddam Hussein was involved with Al Qaeda, which of course was nonsense. They wanted to think he had weapons of mass destruction, which also was nonsense. The UN inspectors said that again and again, but nobody would believe them.

It's deliberate neglect of the one last hope. The League of Nations failed, and the UN was the next best hope and we have deliberately turned our backs upon it, neglected it and distrusted it. When we get a good Secretary General like [Hammarskjöld](#), we murder him. He was definitely killed, because he was interfering in the dreams of the British in particular, and perhaps the Belgians, in Katanga. It's a very sad story, and I don't know where we go from here.

Nicolas Davies: Right, well, where we seem to be going from here is to a loss of American power around the world, because the U.S. has so badly [abused its power](#). In the U.S., we keep hearing that this is a Cold War between the U.S. and China, or maybe the U.S., China and Russia, but I think we all hopefully can work for a more multipolar world.

As you say, the UN Security Council needs reform, and hopefully the American people are understanding that we cannot unilaterally rule the world, that the ambition for a U.S. global empire is an incredibly dangerous pipe-dream that has really led us to an impasse.

Denis Halliday: Perhaps the only good thing coming out of Covid-19 is the slow realization that, if everybody doesn't get a vaccine, we fail, because we, the rich and the powerful with the money and the vaccines, will not be safe until we make sure the rest of the world is safe, from Covid and the next one that's coming along the track undoubtedly.

And this implies that if we don't do trade with China or other countries we have reservations about, because we don't like their government, we don't like communism, we don't like socialism, whatever it is, we just have to live with that, because without each other we can't survive. With the climate crisis and all the other issues related to that, we need each other more than ever perhaps, and we need collaboration. It's just basic common sense that we work and live together.

The U.S. has something like 800 military bases around the world, of various sizes. China is certainly surrounded and this is a very dangerous situation, totally unnecessary. And now the rearming with fancy new nuclear weapons when we already have nuclear weapons that are twenty times bigger than the one that destroyed Hiroshima. Why on Earth? It's just irrational nonsense to continue these programs, and it just doesn't work for humanity.

I would hope the U.S. would start perhaps retreating and sorting out its own domestic problems, which are quite substantial. I'm reminded every day when I look at CNN here in

my home about the difficulties of race and all the other things that you're well aware of that need to be addressed. Being policeman to the world was a bad decision.

Nicolas Davies: Absolutely. So the political, economic and military system we live under is not only genocidal at this point, but also suicidal. Thank you, Denis, for being a voice of reason in this insane world.

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