

It comes closer to being a sort of committee - a world committee with little more than advisory powers.

The United Nations is a body composed of sixty sovereign nations - and the key word is "sovereign." They are sixty independent nations. They meet on terms of equality. Meeting together, the aim is to bring their national policies into harmony. But they remain independent, self-governing (i.e., sovereign) nations. That is the reason why sometimes the U.N. is unable to do what many would like to see it do in forcing certain nations to act in certain ways.

You may have heard it said that the U.N. can give orders to the United States and to other countries. It has been charged, for example, that it "dragged" us into war in Korea. The truth is just the opposite. It was the United States which appealed to the U.N.'s Security Council to approve action against the Communist aggression in Korea and to call on other member-nations of the U.N. to help throw back that aggression. But note that it could only ask these other nations to help; if they did not want to, the U.N. could not order them to.

Moreover, the Security Council cannot act in any matter against the wishes of the United States, for this nation is one of the five permanent members of the Council any one of which is able to block action at any time by its sole vote. (This is the much-debated "veto", about which more will be said later.)

Again, you may have heard it said that a U.N. supergovernment can impose laws on the people of the United States and of other countries. This also is a fairy tale. It got started when a decision by a single judge in a lower court in California argued that the U.N. Charter constitutes a treaty superior in authority to American laws. A higher court set aside this decision. The fact is that the U.N. is specifically forbidden by its Charter "to intervene in matters which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state."

The U.N. is so far from being a supergovernment, so stringently prohibited from interfering in our U.S. domestic concerns, that many students of international affairs will argue that the nations - our own included - have gone too far in circumscribing its powers. But that is a theoretical debate; what we are interested in is what the U.N. actually is - and isn't.

The U.N. organization is easy to understand. There are 60 members, all, as has been said, independent nations. These nations send their delegates to a General Assembly which meets annually, unless it should be called into special session. In this General Assembly, each nation has the same number of delegates (5) and each casts one vote. The United States and Uruguay, for instance, meet as equals in the Assembly.

The Assembly does most of its work through committees. Some of these are standing committees; some are committees which function during the interval between sessions of the Assembly; some are special committees set up to deal with a particular situation which threatens peace. An example is the U.N. Conciliation Commission for Palestine.