The most vital lesson to be learned, in my view, is that the League of Nations failed because members and non-members alike – the international community at large – allowed it to fail. Undoubtedly, there were flaws in the Covenant of the League of Nations, but those alone cannot account for the demise of the institution. From the beginning, the League was undermined by a dangerous combination of unrealistic expectations and insufficient commitments. Those difficulties were compounded by a perception that the lofty rhetoric of the Covenant did not correspond sufficiently with the actual values, interests and experience of those members and non-members upon whom its success depended.

Some great powers – including the United States, which had played an important role in promoting the creation of the organization – chose to stay on the outside for all or part of its history. Those empty chairs certainly eroded the credibility of the League. But even those states which participated in the debates cannot escape blame.

If Canadians, since 1945, can take justifiable pride in the positive role which their country has played on the international scene, a cursory glance at our participation within the councils of the League of Nations will reveal that we were not always such constructive internationalists. From the outset of the League, our delegates' mission consisted in seeking to remove or nullify Article Ten of the Covenant, which was unanimously recognized as the key to collective global security. Canada's representatives pursued those negative efforts, with some lamentable success, throughout the 1920s. Then, together with the rest of the international community, we shied away altogether from our responsibilities and obligations in the critical decade which followed.

Many of those who witnessed firsthand in Geneva the demise of the League and the tragic and immensely bloody consequences of the failure of that attempt at world diplomacy – such as Canadian diplomats Lester Pearson and Hume Wrong – helped to shape the successor organization. It is hardly surprising that their experiences in Geneva influenced, for good and for ill, their approach to the new attempt to craft a world organization which would protect future generations from the scourge of war. The Charter approach to international peace and security was a formula for dealing, in retrospect, with the disasters of the 1920s and 1930s and the aggressive dictatorships which had plunged the world into the Second World War.

The commitments which were made to create a post-war international organization emerged from meetings of the principal powers which had combated the Axis countries. The institution which they established drew heavily on wartime as well as pre-war experience. The initial plan for the United Nations was developed privately by the four great powers – Britain, the United States, the Soviet Union and China – in meetings at Dumbarton Oaks, near Washington, D.C., in the fall of 1944, while the war in Europe and in the Far