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AN OPTIMISTIC ASSESSMENT OF UN ACHIEVEMENT

An Address by the Secretary of State for External Affairs, the Honourable Mitchell Sharp, to the Twenty-Seventh Session of the General Assembly of the United Nations, New York, September 28, 1972.

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It is a current commonplace, Mr. President, to take a dark view of the performance and prospects of the United Nations. One respected international commentator observed just the other day: "The United Nations organization has never been weaker than it is now"; while your predecessor, Mr. Secretary-General, has called the phase through which the organization is now passing "a time of trials".

There is ample evidence to justify a sense of defeatism. The international community often seems incapable of preventing war, powerless in the face of acts of terrorism, apathetic at the spectacle of starvation and misery, and irresponsible in its willingness to risk permanent damage to the environment. We seek to explain this by observing that, in a world of sovereign nation states, the United Nations is bound to reflect the weaknesses of the international society that produced it. Time and again, national egotism seems to be the ruling principle of that society.

This is at the root of the world's deep anxiety. For the better part of this century, we have known nationalism has imperfections. Yet mankind is not about to do away with sovereign states. Indeed, the events of the century, by breaking up old empires and multiplying new sovereignties, have acted as a stimulus to nationalism. New states are not willing to deny themselves the advantages they believe older states have gained from national independence. Certain great tasks of social and economic construction are indeed impossible except in conditions of independence. And while some advantages of independence may prove illusory, even this is irrelevant, since the Charter establishes national sovereignty as a fundamental principle.

These are powerful considerations. In the face of them, it is unrealistic to plan for an international order in which the system based upon sovereign national units has been replaced. Instead it is more hopeful and more sensible to work to transform the existing system, encouraging it when necessary to produce the antidote to its own poisons.