The United Nations in the Popular Imagination: Myth and Reality

Instructor: R. Glenn Mittermann, MA, JD
Classroom: 203 Chapman
Time: 10:00 – 11:20; Monday & Wednesday
Instructor’s contact information:
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  Office hours 10:00 – 11:00 Tuesday & Thursday
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  Website: Blackboard

Introduction

We hear about the United Nations regularly in the international news whether the issue is climate change, war and peace, nuclear proliferation, humanitarian crises, human rights and more. Yet few of us have a good understanding of exactly what the UN is, when and why it acts, the scope of its authority and its impact on people’s lives. When the UN is mentioned on the news or discussed in the media in the United States, it is likely to be about a third world dictator using the UN General Assembly as a global platform to denounce the United States, or complaints by commentators that the UN failed to act in time of crisis. Some US politicians seek to gain political advantage by alleging that the UN is undermining American values and US national sovereignty. Not surprisingly, in a 2009 Gallup Poll, 65% of Americans were of the opinion that “the United Nations is doing a poor job of solving the problems under its care. Only 26% believe it is doing a good job.” In this course we will attempt to understand better these attitudes and the real work of the United Nations to separate myth from reality. In doing so we will examine a range of questions, including:

- What are the attitudes towards the UN in the US and other countries?
- Why are so many Americans skeptical of the UN?
- Is the UN irrelevant, sometimes useful or essential in today’s world?
- What expectations do we personally have of the UN?
- What does the UN actually do?
- Is the UN working for or against United States values and interests?
- Why does the UN get involved in specific issues?
- What is it like to work at the UN?
Course Description

Students will investigate public attitudes towards the United Nations, with a focus on American perspectives, and compare them with the work that the UN is actually engaged in on the ground, and endeavor to understand the reasons for the gap between the two.

Students will not be spoon fed information to regurgitate on exams. Rather, the success of the seminar will depend on the active engagement of all students in investigating the answers to series of question, and participating in in-depth discussions with fellow students, the instructor and outside experts.

We will use a range of sources and methodologies in tackling this subject. In addition to assigned readings and videos, students will also be able to interview – including via Skype – current UN officials and other people (NGOs, government officials) working with the UN. The Instructor will provide his insight into the politics and inner working of the UN based on more than twenty years of experience working in various UN agencies and programs. Critical thinking and oral and written expression will be emphasized through a series of short written assignments, individual and group presentations and on-going class discussions.

Course Objectives

By the end of the course students will have

- tested their own beliefs and opinions about the UN as well as those of the general public and fellow students;
- had an opportunity to explore several pressing international issues;
- an understanding the “nuts and bolts” of multilateral cooperation;
- sharpened their critical thinking, analytical writing and oral presentation skills.
Week 1 – January 6 & 8
M: Introductions; Syllabus, Instructor’s expectations and working methods of the course; Why is there a United Nations? (*presentation*)
W: Why is there a UN? (*continued*)

Week 2 – January 13 & 15
M: What is the UN? (*presentation*)
W: What is the UN? (*continued*) (*Reflection note 1 due*)

Week 3 – January 20 & 22
M: No class (MLK Jr. Day)
W: Overview of public attitudes on the UN (*Reflection note 2 due*)

Week 4 – January 27 & 29
M: The UN and Peace and Security (*Reflection note 3 due*)
W: The UN and Peace and Security (*continued*) – Video

Week 5 – February 3 & 5
M: Skype interview with former UN Assistant Secretary-General (Peacekeeping)
W: The UN and Peace and Security (*continued*) (*Reflection note 4 due*)

Week 6 – February 10 & 12
M: Human rights and the UN
W: Skype interview with former staff attorney for Amnesty International.

Week 7 – February 17 & 19
M: Human rights and the UN (*continued*). (*Reflection note 5 due*)
W: Human development and the UN (*presentation and discussion*)

Week 8 – February 24 & 26
M: Skype interview with former Senior Adviser to the UN Secretary-General on Climate Change
W: Interview: to be announced (*Reflection note 6 due*)

Week 9 – March 3 & 5
M: Individual presentations
W: Individual presentations (*continued*)

Week 10 – March 10 & 12
M: Individual presentations (*continued*)
W: Global Governance (*Research papers due*)

Course Requirements
Readings and videos. All required readings are included in Hanhimaki or the reading packet (both of which will be available at the University Bookstore, or on the Internet or Blackboard. One or two copies of the reading packet will also be put on reserve at Knight Library. Students are expected to complete all of the readings as well as other assigned work before the class for which they are assigned. It is essential that you keep up with readings so that our daily discussions are fruitful. To help focus attention on the importance of the readings, we will have up to 10 very short unannounced quizzes on the readings during the term.

In-class discussion. At the core of this seminar is daily discussion. Participate! This is the single most important thing that the Instructor expects from each and every student. Remember: this is a seminar, and 30% of your grade will be based on your attendance and participation.

Individual Research. Each student will do research on UN activities covered by the UN's mandate such as peacekeeping, environmental sustainability, international law, humanitarian relief and much more. Individual research should be focused on a case study. For example, if researching on UN peacekeeping, the student could include a case study on the UN peacekeeping mission in East Timor; if researching the UN’s humanitarian work, you could include a case study on the response to cyclone Nargis in 2009; if researching the UN’s work on global health you could include a case study on WHO’s work on malaria. All research topics must be approved by the Instructor in advance. The work will be done in stages: A preliminary paper outline will first be handed in (1-2 pages). Each student will get written and oral feedback from the instructor on this work and advice on how to proceed. You will then to submit a 10 page paper (typed, double-spaced with standard margins and fonts). A brief presentation on the findings will be made to the class.

Reflection Notes. Each student will prepare six short (1-2 page) notes during the term reacting to issues presented in class or specific assignments. For example, students may be asked to react to one of the Skype interviews or an article about the UN in the news. Each note should be a concise, logically structured and clearly articulated response to the question asked.

Communication. We will use e-mail as the normal mode of communication. Students should also regularly consult Blackboard where you will be able to find the latest news about the class, required reading assignments/videos to view, a copy of the syllabus, and links to supplementary information. Some assignments may involve use of Blackboard discussion boards.

Office hours. Please take full advantage of office hours, or make appointments outside of office hours to pose questions, discuss readings, or explore related topics with the instructor. These hours are set aside for you; feel free to drop by to talk or raise any questions, concerns or comments that you may have. If you encounter a line during office hours, please make sure the instructor knows that you are waiting, and he will do his best to accommodate everyone as quickly as possible.
Winter 2014 -- FRESHMAN SEMINAR -- INTL 199

Ground Rules

• Complete/view all the reading/videos for a topic by the first date on which we are scheduled to discuss that topic, unless you are informed otherwise by the Instructor.
• Assignments must be handed in on time.
• Be present and attentive in class. Don't do anything that might distract others in class. Exercise common sense.
• Plagiarism results in an automatic grade of “F”, and is reported to the University, which can result in other sanctions. See the link: http://libweb.uoregon.edu/guides/plagiarism/students/

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<tr>
<th>Grading</th>
<th>Totals</th>
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<tr>
<td>Individual research</td>
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<tr>
<td>Paper and brief presentation to class</td>
<td>60 points</td>
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<td>Reflection notes</td>
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<td>6 notes, 10 points each</td>
<td>60 points</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reading quizzes</td>
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<td>10 short quizzes on readings, 2 points each</td>
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<td>Participation</td>
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<td>Attendance and discussion (Instructor assessment and peer review)</td>
<td>60 points</td>
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Total 200 points

Bibliography


