



Walter Berns

WHERE THE MAJORITY RULES: A UN DIARY

How I spent my summer vacation.

Early June: I am asked whether I would be willing to serve as the American "expert" in a United Nations Seminar on the Relations that exist between Human Rights, Peace, and Development. (Actually, my caller begins by asking whether I would be willing to kill two weeks in New York in early August.) The Seminar, he explains, is one of those UN functions whose establishment the United States votes against but, when outvoted, it feels obliged to attend, the principle being that a no-vote is better than no vote. I protest that I hope to be in Maine in August and, in any case, in August I would prefer to be anywhere other than New York; he replies that I should look upon this as a form of national service. Besides, he adds, since the appointment would be made by the UN Commission on Human Rights, I would receive the UN per diem allowance which is somewhat more generous than the American (even though the money comes from the same source, us). Warming up to his task, he leads me to believe that if I stay at a modest hotel—he must have had in mind the YMCA—I might break even. Well, with one thing or another, it proves to be an offer I cannot refuse.

June 22: Today I receive from Geneva a formal notice of my appointment. The Director of the UN's Division of Human Rights writes that participants in the seminar are expected to contribute working papers "approximately ten quarto-sized, double-spaced typewritten pages in length," which papers will be translated, reproduced, and distributed "in advance of the Seminar, if possible."

July 1: A packet arrives from Geneva containing three working papers: one from the Soviet participant (44 pages) detailing the life-long human rights work of Mr. Brezhnev; one from the Indian (55 pages); and one from the Norwegian (85 pages).

Walter Berns is Resident Scholar at the American Enterprise Institute.

The Norwegian is not a participant, although he will participate; he is a "consultant" employed by the Seminar; reading his paper, I wonder if consultants are reimbursed on a per page rather than on a per diem basis. All three papers indicate that there has been a marked improvement in the "overall global human rights situation" in recent years; proof of this is to be found in the number of UN declarations on the subject.

July 15: I finish a ten quarto-sized (actually a ten 8½ x 11 sized) page double-spaced typewritten paper and send it off to Geneva. In it, among other things, I point out that I don't think the "overall global human rights situation" is actually so hotsy-totsy. "Billions of the world's peoples," I write, "are being governed without their consent, millions are being systematically and deliberately annihilated, hundreds of thousands are crowding fearfully into the flimsiest of vessels and

fleeing the lands of their births, millions more see their homelands suddenly and viciously occupied by an army launched by a neighboring state, while, across a continent, another people trembles at the prospect of being invaded—because they had committed the horrendous mistake of forming a free trade union!—by troops launched by that same friendly neighbor, and so on." Where, I ask, is the evidence of an improved human rights situation? "Iran? El Salvador?"

August 3: I arrive at the U.S. Mission to the United Nations (otherwise known as USUN), am assigned an office and an "alternate participant," who is a foreign service officer and a UN veteran; he will act as a kind of shepherd for me. When leaving the Mission to cross the street for the opening session, we run into one of our UN ambassadors, a friend from Washington, who gives me an idea of the importance generally attached to the Seminar by greeting me with the words, "What in the hell are you doing here?" It is a blistering day, so it is a relief to leave USUN, where Jimmy Carter's thermostat rules are still in effect, for the General Assembly Building, where the temperature is kept at a comfortable 72 degrees. My shepherd introduces me to a number of my fellow participants who prove to be not "experts" at all but members of their various countries' UN missions; in fact, the only other country that appointed an "expert" is the Soviet Union, which named its "Director of the Institute of State and Law of the Academy of Sciences." He is accompanied by a short chap with dark glasses who, I presume, is the KGB agent. Since under the prevailing alphabetical seating rules we are placed next to the Soviet delegation, the four of us are soon engaged in an exchange of pleasantries. The same cannot be said of the situation with our neighbors on our



right, the PLO, with whom, my shepherd informs me, we do not speak and *must* not be photographed. The PLO, along with SWAPO, the African National Congress, and the Pan African Congress, is present as an observer, one of the "Liberation Movements" recognized by the UN. My shepherd, who has an eye for such details, notices that the alphabetical rules have been violated in the seating of the observers; a quiet word with some UN functionary leads to a rearrangement of the plastic name cards and a reshuffling of the observing delegations. We end up with the African National Congress on our right.

The first order of business and, as it turns out, the morning's only business, is the election of the Seminar's officers, all of whom are elected unanimously. The chairman (or, as the Australian participant, a woman, will insist on saying, the chairperson) is from Sri Lanka, the rapporteur is a charming lawyer from Sierra Leone, and there are three vice-chairmen: one from the Soviet bloc (Bulgaria), one from the Third World (Cuba, formally nominated by Mexico), and one from the WEOG (the Western European and others group). By some alchemy that I do not understand, we decide that WEOG's vice-chairman must be the participant from Finland; unfortunately, due to the air controllers' strike, he has not yet arrived. Belgium, speaking on behalf of the WEOG, asks the chair if the election of the third vice-chairman can be delayed pending his arrival. None of this matters so nobody objects. We adjourn for lunch, which I take with a USUN friend in the UN cafeteria where prices seem to have been set in the late 1950s and, perhaps in an effort to refute Milton Friedman, not changed since. We reconvene 30 minutes late—every session begins at least 30 minutes late—and spend the afternoon adopting the agenda and deciding, despite the wishes of Kenya who prefers that we be divided into three discussion groups, to do our business in

plenary sessions. As France points out, most delegations consist of only two members and some of only one, and neither two nor one is divisible by three. A very sensible observation, but what the decision will mean is that there will be nothing resembling discussion, merely one speech after another.

August 4: The WEOG vice-chairman is elected unanimously. The chairman delivers his opening lecture and sets the tone of the Seminar by saying that it is "cynical to speak of civil rights to a poor and hungry man." The rapporteur follows by reciting a long list of UN declarations on human rights, peace, and development, and contradicts the chairman, whether knowingly or not I don't know, by saying that "people living in freedom are likely to work harder and thereby contribute to development." Cyprus is next; after congratulating each of the officers on his election to an important post in this important Seminar, he drones on until 12:10. Since no one else indicated a desire to speak, we adjourn until 3 p.m. During lunch I am informed by a USUN friend that it costs \$400 to publish one page of an official UN document. This includes the cost of translation and distribution; it also represents more than twice the annual per capita income of some countries. We reconvene shortly after 3:30 and spend a few hours listening to India, the USSR, France, and the Norwegian consultant congratulate the officers on their election and speak of the interrelation of human rights, peace, and development. Everyone speaks of a right to development, so I raise my hand, which, when noted by the secretary, will earn me a place on the list of speakers. In due course, I speak my piece: Development is not a right but a necessity. To say that the 780 million people living in absolute poverty have a right to development suggests that they are poor because they are not developed (which is true), and that they are not developed because someone—guess who—is denying them this right.

And to say (as every other speaker does) that the human right to develop is a right possessed by collectivities as well as individuals is merely to invite the governments of those collectivities to violate individual rights. For example, a government might decide that agricultural development can best take place through collectivization and then seize all private farms. This is likely to be resisted by the dispossessed farmers, who will then be dealt with harshly; in fact, they will be killed. And why not? The right to develop includes a right to the means of development as well as the right to decide on which means are appropriate or necessary. Thus, in this case, the UN would be sanctioning the elimination of the farmers. (A half hour later the "distinguished participant from the USSR" will take exception to my remarks, but I will lean over and say, innocently, that I didn't mention the Soviet Union or even utter the word "kulaks.") The Norwegian consultant says he is for human rights and peace and development, urges us to "embrace all three and to rise above them," and says there must be a "comprehensive redistribution" of income, which, of course, is what this seminar is really about.

August 5: Morocco identifies Israel as the world's chief villain. Bulgaria tells us that the "great October Revolution opened up a new epoch for human rights," and that individual rights cannot be separated from collective human rights. He concludes by calling on "some countries" to transfer wealth to the poor. Cuba, who, after Algeria, will prove to be the nastiest participant, says there is no possibility of tension between individual and collective rights; Prime Minister Castro solved this problem when he said the UN must recognize the rights of mankind. He spends the next 15 minutes denouncing me. In my working paper, I had criticized the idea that human rights can be declared into existence by the UN; what the UN can give, I wrote, the UN can take away (which it now proposes to do with freedom of the press). In any case, it is simply foolish to suggest that one can discover his human rights by telephoning the UN Secretariat. (Dial a human right?) Cuba's answer to this is that, unlike 1945, the UN now represents the majority of the world's people, so it can say what human rights are—and the United States better get used to it. Syria denounces Israel, and we adjourn for lunch. Resuming at 3:40, Czechoslovakia, in the person of a rather attractive young woman, gives its version of the Soviet line, but gives it in English. Ireland, in an eloquent speech, reminds us that this is supposed to be a seminar of experts, and that "we don't come here with instructions in our pockets"; this is followed by a series of speeches—by Algeria, Belgium, Senegal, Kenya, Australia, and then the World Council of Churches which has no instructions be-



cause it has no government to issue them. The day ends with a passionate speech by the PLO; it appears that "almost all the miseries in the world, during the past 200 years, have been caused by capitalism."

August 6: The chairman tells us that "fruitful discussion has taken place." In the afternoon, Senegal, the World Council of Churches, and the USSR call for disarmament.

August 7: I put in an appearance at the appointed hour merely to see if anyone else is present; the only person in the chamber is the representative of the African National Congress. He is reading the *New York Times*. In the course of the day, Romania, Morocco, Egypt, Finland, Ireland, Australia ("Thank you, Mr. Chairperson"), Costa Rica, and Kenya deplore the arms race. Kenya also thanks the USSR for the most appropriate gift ever given to the UN and the world; it seems that some years ago, the Soviets installed a piece of sculpture in the UN garden depicting the beating of a sword into a plowshare. Cuba follows with a vituperative speech calling upon the United States to beat *its* sword into a plowshare. We adjourn one hour and fifteen minutes early, being told by the chairman that it has been an arduous week. That evening my wife calls me from Mount Desert Island to say that Maine is very pleasant.

I spend the weekend writing my objections to the Seminar's report, which, of course, I have not yet seen because it is not yet written.

August 10: The week begins (37 minutes late) with a long speech by the Soviet Union calling upon the UN to ban production of the neutron bomb (which, over the weekend, the United States said it was going to produce and deploy), and calling upon the United States to ratify SALT II. He also says the UN should establish the new International Economic Order (a code term for massive redistribution of wealth from us to the developing nations), adopt the resolutions on mass communications (a code term for restrictions on the freedom of the press), and promote research on the relations between human rights and peace; the results of this research are to be given to students. (I note that in addressing the participants he always says "gentlemen," which must make Australia squirm.) Nigeria recommends that we denounce colonialism, neo-colonialism (and I remind him of quasi-colonialism), imperialism, and racism. China, in its first utterance of the Seminar, adds hegemonism to the list. Cuba calls for a "massive transfer of resources to the developing countries and complete forgiveness of debts accumulated in the past." This strikes most seminarians as a good idea. The World Jewish Congress speaks on behalf of Israel. We adjourn an hour-and-a-half before the scheduled 6 p.m. closing.

August 11: The Indian participant sweeps in, clad in still another dazzling sari. This reminds me of the story in the *Times* today; it seems that in India, which, of course, has signed the UN convention on women's rights, women can still be bought and sold on the open market. I resist the temptation to ask India about this. During the morning session we listen to many speeches, including one from the Bahai International Community. The Soviet Union leans over to ask, "Vat's Bahai?" I tell him it's a religious organization and he smiles condescendingly. In the afternoon, I point out that everyone present, even the Soviet Union, is for human rights, although Marx himself had nothing but contempt for the very idea of rights; that it is foolish to think that we can agree on a report because we have incompatible ideas on what these rights are. Some of us, I point out, say human rights are those natural rights delineated by the political philosophers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and those that are reasonably derived from them; others say that a human right is any desired good—development, for example—that the UN transforms into a right; still others define as a human right whatever their own governments are prepared to grant, such as free dental care (or as Clifford Orwin and Thomas Pangle put it mischievously in a recent paper, free *bad* dental care). As for what the peoples of the world think about human rights, I suggest we look at the countries people escape from, or try to escape from, and the countries they escape to, or try to escape to. This right to emigrate, I say, is derived from the fundamental natural right not to be governed without one's consent. If this right is secured, the civil rights (the right to speak, to vote governments out of office, to acquire, possess, and pass on to one's heirs the property one earns by the sweat of one's brow or the acuity of one's brain, and to associate in free trade unions, etcetera) are likely to be secured. The truth of this was demonstrated in America by an

egregious denial of rights: I refer, of course, to the failure to afford black Americans the opportunity to vote for or against the Constitution in 1787-8. The consequence was a denial of their right to be part of the constitutional majorities that governed the country, and it is not surprising that, until after the Civil War, they did not enjoy civil rights. That is why we in the liberal democracies attach so much importance to this right to be governed only with consent. In fact, of course, we all know that human rights properly understood are best secured in liberal democracies, and that liberal democracies are the most developed; as for peace, it is worth pointing out that there has never been a war between two liberal democracies. This ought to form the basis of our report on the relation of human rights, peace, and development; better that than a listing of demands which we call rights and which, as Ambassador Kirkpatrick said recently [and she picked it up from that Orwin and Pangle paper], may be likened to letters to Santa Claus. I have news for the participants of this Seminar: There ain't no Santa Claus. And if the report is going to contain a condemnation of Israel, honesty requires us to point out that Jordan has killed more Palestinians, that Syria has killed more Palestinians, than has the state of Israel. Finally, although I cannot speak for the government of the United States, I think the record shows that it stands ready to assist any country that demonstrates its willingness to use assistance in a way calculated to foster development. Bulgaria, Australia, India, and Cuba deplore my letters to Santa Claus allusion. Cuba points out (unnecessarily, I think) that property rights are "out of fashion" at the UN. As for this immigration business, he asks, what is it in fact? "A brains drain." The United States only takes the doctors and scientists educated in the poor countries. As for freedom of the press, why has the American press paid no attention to this Seminar? (I could have told him, because they're all in Maine.)

At 5:26, the PLO begins a violent speech and suddenly the Seminar becomes interesting. He makes a deprecatory reference to the Camp David accords, and Egypt bangs on the table and shouts, "*Pointe d'ordre! Pointe d'ordre!*" She insists that Camp David is not on the agenda. It seems, however, that points of order are not allowed in a seminar, but, then, what we are engaged in cannot fairly be described as a seminar. The chairman seems to be aware of this because he asks the PLO to confine his remarks to agenda items, and Egypt settles back in her chair. I decide that this is fun, so when the PLO, without referring to Camp David, launches a tirade against Israel, I pull out the plastic name card—"the United States of America"—and begin pounding on the table. Israel, I say, is not on the agenda. This produces some consternation among the participants



because most of them are of the opinion that Israel (along with South Africa and American wealth) is the agenda. Still, I am sustained by the chair. But this has no effect on the PLO who, of course, has only one speech in his repertory, and when he continues his denunciation of Israel, I again bang with the name card. Under what conditions, I ask, are observers permitted to speak? At the pleasure of the official participants, I am told. Well, if it comes to a vote, I am sure to lose, so I, too, settle back in my chair. When the tirade resumes, I gather up my papers and walk out, which, I confess, gives me some pleasure: The United States walks out (even though, of course, as an independent "expert" I am not representing the United States). Back in the USUN, I report all this to my shepherd (who, wisely, no longer bothers to accompany me to these sessions); he says I must be late to the next day's session to make it clear that my departure was not required by the need to attend to one of nature's functions. I point out that it is not easy to be late; one has to be later, and that is not readily accomplished. It is decided that he will take my place for the first hour tomorrow, which has the further advantage of allowing me to be absent when the Soviet Union replies to my speech.

August 12: I arrive at noon and am told by my shepherd that the time was given over entirely to the USSR's reply to me. On the table there is a set of draft recommendations, fifty-odd in number and largely repetitive, since it is largely a compilation of recommendations made by the various participants. France makes the reasonable suggestion that there should be a drafting committee, but Nigeria says there is no time for that. We adjourn to confer privately on the question of whether there is time for a drafting committee. When reconvened, various participants

argue over who possesses the collective right to development: Algeria insists it is the states, Australia prefers communities, Cuba agrees with Algeria but nevertheless fancies the term "peoples." Aware that we are not making progress and that time is running out, we agree that the rapporteur should return in the afternoon with a two- or three-page draft of recommendations, which, surprisingly, he manages to do. So, being pressed for time, we reconvene at 3:25, only 25 minutes late, and begin consideration, item by item, of the recommendations. It appears that UN seminars are expected to achieve consensus on their recommendations, which affords me opportunities to toss a few monkey wrenches. I cannot agree with any resolution, I say, that speaks of the right to development. Rights, I say, have corresponding duties; for example, in the United States we have a right to speak freely, and the government has the duty to protect speakers; in the Soviet Union they have a right to work, and the government has the duty to provide jobs, at which point the Soviet Union interrupts to say that Soviet citizens have the right to free speech, too. I say that is nice, then ask (pretending not to know the answer), who has the duty that corresponds to a country's right to development? Ireland asks more or less the same question concerning the so-called right to peace. France asks what the fifth resolution means. I offer the following new resolution: "This Seminar appeals to the General Assembly to devise procedures by which it may be ascertained whether the peoples of all countries enjoy their fundamental human right of being governed only with their consent." The USSR objects to this. On behalf of the PLO, Algeria argues vigorously in favor of the resolution calling upon the UN to guarantee the Palestinian people their rights; I offer an amendment adding, "the people of Israel, the people of Afghanistan, and the people of Cam-

bodia." This proves to be a formidable monkey wrench, and haggling continues until 6:15 when the chair announces that the various interpreters (some twenty in number: French into English, into Chinese, into Spanish, into Russian; Russian into . . .) insist on their right to go home.

August 13: We spend the day haggling, much to the annoyance of the Soviet Union, who wants to get on. I ask why the Soviet Union is so anxious; after all, Soviet delegates are renowned for their ability to outlast, or outsit, the delegates of other countries. "Iron-bottom Molotov" was a term of grudging respect in the United States, I add. He is not amused. By the end of the day, we have approved—i.e., gained consensus on—one innocuous resolution.

August 14 (last day): We WEOG's have our customary pre-session meeting to discuss strategy. As usual, the expression most frequently heard is, "We can live with that." That speaks volumes, because it reflects the fact that the West is engaged in a holding operation here, and that the initiative, and the power, here as in the UN generally, is in the hands of others. Australia is becoming annoyed with me and, truth to tell, I with her. The morning session is devoted entirely to consideration of the following Algerian resolution:

The Seminar recognizes that racism as a state ideology violently negates the basic humanity of its victims. Apartheid, racism, and racial discrimination, colonialism, neo-colonialism, foreign domination and occupation [the Namibia situation], aggression, and threats against national sovereignty and territorial integrity, and the denial to self-determination of a people are flagrant breaches of human rights, deny the political and social conditions for development, and constitute a threat to international peace. Collaboration with states that have racism as a complement to state ideology endangers peace and international security. The fight of oppressed peoples for self-determination is an inalienable right.

That's quite a mouthful, but I indicate my support, provided the following words are added: "The right of a people not to be governed without its consent is also an inalienable right." Algeria makes the reasonable point that my addition is not germane to the subject of her resolution. Cuba, in what he would have me believe is the spirit of conciliation, says I should introduce this as a separate resolution. I say I am quite willing to do this if the two resolutions can be voted on as a package. Cuba and Algeria refuse this, and I refuse to withdraw my amendment unless, as a separate resolution, it is voted on along with the Algerian resolution. Cuba becomes angry, saying that there is no reason why we cannot vote on, first, the Algerian, then the American resolution. Since it is now after one o'clock, the chairman adjourns us, whereupon the Soviet Union says to me, "I agree with you. Package deal, yes?" I thank him for his support and he makes a beeline for the Cuban



participant. One minute later the Cuban comes to me, a broad smile on his handsome face. "O.K.," he says in halting English, "a package." I apologize for my inability to speak Spanish and we shake hands. When, after lunch, the package is formally proposed, France offers what I see as an insignificant amendment, saying that, at least in the French version, there is a troubling phrase that he cannot accept. Algeria refuses to accept the French changes and the package deal collapses.

We then turn to another resolution championed by Algeria:

This Seminar appeals to the U.N. member states to implement U.N. resolutions and decisions concerning the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people to freely determine their political status and exercise their human rights as a prerequisite to achieving peace and development.

I offer the following amendment: After the words, "Palestinian people," add, "the people of Israel, the people of Afghanistan, and the people of Cambodia." To put it mildly, no consensus is reached on this, and the wrangling becomes somewhat nasty. The Soviet Union cannot understand me, he says; Professor Berns is surely not like the American people he has encountered during his very pleasant visit to New York; they are cooperative, friendly. "And Professor Berns? He's not democratic. He's preventing us from doing our business. He talks about democracy. O.K. Why doesn't he go along with the majority?" Algeria pipes up, claiming I have not kept a promise I made to her, and proceeds to lecture me on morality. (At this point I half expect to see a blind man grope his way into the chamber and start lecturing me on the colors of the rainbow.) Australia joins in the attack, then Morocco. I haven't felt so uncomfortable in a parliamentary situation since the Cornell faculty meetings of 1969; still, I don't budge. Instead, I remind the participants of what it means to have a right, and that I intend to exercise my right to withhold my consent. They have a corresponding duty to allow me to exercise it. Kenya proposes a recess during which some of us might get together privately. The chairman agrees, and a half dozen of us repair to the adjoining small conference room. Here I am persuaded by Morocco that my amendment is not really germane to the Algerian. O.K., I say, I'll withdraw it and replace it with this one: Add, "and the right of Israel to live in peace within secure and recognized boundaries." This, I point out, is germane; this is the language of UN resolution 242. . . . Of course, this is unacceptable. Senegal complains that no one else supports my amendment, but Ireland immediately says he supports it. Morocco then recalls a precedent; it seems that at least one previous UN seminar presented its recommendations in two categories, one for recommendations on which there was consensus, and the other for recommendations on which there was

no consensus. We troop back to the main chamber where a new quarrel erupts: Cuba argues that my resolutions don't even belong in the second category because no one else supports them, or almost no one else supports them. He suggests a third category for my resolutions but, because there is no precedent for this, and because I threaten to object to all recommendations (even the innocuous ones), I eventually win. In this context, I insist that the chair determine how many participants support my resolution concerning Israel's right to live in peace within "secure and recognized boundaries." There is some confusion and hesitation, but eventually the following raise their hands: Ireland, France, Australia, Portugal, and Belgium. Conspicuously not raising their hands are Cyprus, Egypt, India, Mexico, Finland, and, of course, all the Soviet bloc and Third World countries—this in a Seminar that will adopt resolutions on the sovereign rights of nations, etc. . . .

Eventually, we adopt our two categories of recommendations: consensus (innocuous) and nonconsensus (contentious). But it is now 7:45, and the interpreters have agreed to remain only until 8:30, and we have not yet adopted our report. (Our recommendations constitute only chapter four of a four-chapter report.) The chairman suggests we begin immediately to consider the draft submitted by the rapporteur, and that we do so page by page. But the draft numbers some 150 pages, being a compilation of all the various points made during our two weeks. I suggest that we will never finish if we adopt this procedure, that he should merely ask whether there are any objections. (Since we were given the draft only today, I doubt that anyone has had time to read it all; I know that I got through only 30 pages of chapter one.) Australia objects to the uniform use of the masculine pronoun, etc., and suggests that it be redrafted, but when the rapporteur winces, Australia says she is content that her objections be

noted somewhere. Most of us sigh in relief. Whereupon Algeria objects to paragraph 39 of chapter one, which reads as follows: "The view was therefore expressed that it would be preferable to speak of development as a necessity rather than a right. . . ." Yes, she says, that view was expressed, but only by one participant. Here (and elsewhere) it should be indicated that the view was expressed only by one country. (So saying, she glares at me.) Cuba, Senegal, the Soviet Union, et al., rally to her support. I say, I have no objection to these changes being made, but insist that this be done in every case. That is, we must ascertain the number of participants who agree with each view expressed. The chairman shouts that that would take us another two weeks and it is now almost 8:30. "Distinguished participants, we *must* adopt our report. . . . It would be unprecedented for a seminar not to adopt a report, unprecedented!" (Who, I wonder, will ever read it?) Some thirty minutes are consumed by this dispute; finally, the chairman says he will assume that there are no objections to the draft report as written, and before anyone can open his mouth, he bangs his gavel saying, "the report is adopted." It is, in fact, now a few minutes before 9 p.m., but, so far as I can learn by twisting my dial, the interpreters are still with us. This is fortunate because the chairman must make a closing speech. He thanks us, we thank him—and the rapporteur, and the secretary, and the vice-chairman, and the various members of the Secretariat who have been so helpful, and the documents' custodian.

With that we adjourn. As we gather up our papers, Ireland, who is a charming and eloquent man, asks me for my impressions. I say that if asked I shall recommend that the United States reduce its contribution to the UN. (We now pick up 25 percent of the tab, and more.) He says he was afraid I would say that, but for us to do that will mean the end of the United Nations. I



reply that that might not be the tragedy he implies, but he thinks it will be the prelude to World War III. He then chastises the United States for its attitude: "In one sense, you don't take the UN seriously. For example, you are constantly changing your personnel, and as a result you don't establish the relationships that might permit you to work effectively here." We shake hands; in fact, there is a general round of handshaking, and I even receive a friendly slap on the back from Bulgaria. I run for a cab—I am of course late for a dinner engagement—and as I am being driven uptown I reflect that most of the participants will soon be meeting and working together again—in fact, unlike me, they do represent their countries, most of them on the UN's Third Committee (which deals with human rights)—and most of them will regularly vote against the United States. As Cuba said, they are the majority.

August 15: I go to my USUN office and

begin discarding part of the mountain of paper that has accumulated on my desk (and to which, I confess, I contributed a few foothills). Then, as I promised, I go up to the eleventh floor to chat with one of our ambassadors. When I report what Ireland had said about our attitude toward the UN, he says Ireland may be right. And the ambassador may be right, but I wonder what difference it would make if our UN representatives served longer and succeeded in establishing closer relations with other delegations.

I suspect this Seminar was typical of UN meetings, especially of meetings on human rights, and it was surely not convened with the view that we might learn something from each other. It was not conducted with that purpose in mind. One can argue, as I did, that to know what human rights are requires that we understand what it means to be human, and what it is that distinguishes humans from other classes of beings, but all this falls on deaf ears. Jefferson and Tom Paine, following the political philosophers, could speak of the

rights of man and were prepared to explain how these rights were related to and derived from man's nature; but UN seminarians are impatient with such talk. What they want is a UN declaration saying that the "South" has rights and the "North" (which means the United States) has duties, and it matters not a fig to them that, when challenged, they cannot present a rational argument on behalf of their demand. They have the votes.

Privately, some of them will concede that human rights have been best secured in the liberal democracies, but such concessions are quickly overwhelmed by their resentments toward their "former colonial masters." Privately, some of them will acknowledge that the Soviet Union is acting with gross hypocrisy, but the Soviet Union and its bloc supplies them with votes. A U.S. mission made of scores of Eleanor Roosevelts and Adlai Stevensons, all serving for life, would not, I sadly conclude, change this situation one whit. □

Michael Novak

BETTER DEAD THAN THE LIVING DEAD: THE TOTALITARIAN DIFFERENCE

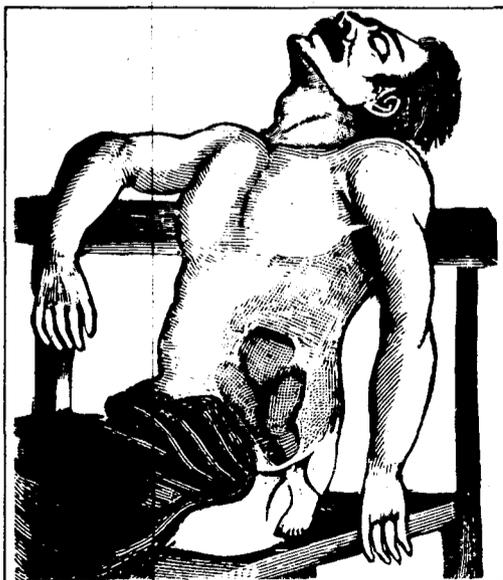
Totalitarian regimes do not measure their successes by the number of corpses they heap up but by the degree to which they render all citizens living corpses.

Years ago, in college, I was taught that the distinction between the authoritarian and the totalitarian regime is the single most important political distinction of our time. Nothing I have seen since makes me doubt that I was well taught. Yet for decades American public life and high political leadership seemed to suffer from the failure to grasp this distinction with lucidity and to employ it critically. Mere anti-Communism seemed flaccid. Mere support for right-wing or left-wing regimes—without ideological awareness—seemed undiscerning and ineffective.

Thus, when Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig and UN Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick brought the long tradition of political science on this point into public usage, I quietly cheered. I naively ex-

Michael Novak is Resident Scholar at the American Enterprise Institute. Last winter he served as U.S. Representative to the 37th Session of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights in Geneva, Switzerland.

pected serious journalists and academics to applaud this bridging of the gap between the academy and government as a step forward for reasoned intelligence. Instead, exactly the opposite proved to be the case. Attacks upon this distinction—absent these many years—have recently been un-



remitting. Political leaders are not usually required to compensate for the intellectual backwardness of their academic and journalistic critics. The interesting question is why they should be so required in this one basic and fundamental case.

The first recorded claim that a state is and ought to be totalitarian was not made by scholars but by its first enthusiastic practitioner—by Benito Mussolini in a speech of October 28, 1925: "*Tutto nello Stato, niente al di fuori dello Stato, nullo contro lo Stato*" ("All things in the State, nothing outside the State, nothing against the State"). No autocrat or dictator of the past ever made such total claims for the state. Mussolini and his cohorts knew quite well that they were establishing something new. They knew they were going beyond the statism of Napoleon, beyond the autocrats of fabled Byzantium, beyond tribal chieftains and Western emperors. The word they consciously chose for this novelty was *totalitario*. By this word they