



Yunker, J. A. (2011). *The Idea of World Government: From Ancient Times to the Twenty-First Century*

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Book Review

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This tightly packed volume is the fifty-second in the Routledge Global Institutions series which aims to provide a set of accessible and comprehensive guides to the history, structure, and roles of international bodies. It takes as its starting point that the idea of a single political organization for the whole world—a world government for a world state—is something which has intrigued political thinkers from, as the title indicates, ancient times. Yunker aims to assess the feasibility of world government and test the proposition held by many that world government is not merely impractical but also dangerous, by examining a range of ideas for world government and presenting his own proposal at the end of the work.

The majority of this short work's focus is on plans beginning with the seventeenth century French writer, Emeric Cruce's, *The New Cyneas* (1623) through to a 2003 article by Alexander Wendt on the inevitability of a world state. In between the author lays out a selection of the proposals for world government and sets them against the political and military context in which they were written. If there is a weakness in the book, it is that for parts, the context outweighs the discussion or even description of the various plans to the extent that we are given only a brief explanation of those on which the author decides to focus.

The first chapter examines the historical antecedents of world government through the conceptual overlap with Empires: both involve the construction of authoritative government covering a range of states and differing populations. But empires have generally been fused through military subjugation and Yunker is more interested in world government through contract, plans, consent, and accommodation rather than through conquest. Even when looking at these, the book does recognise that many of the early plans for world government were in fact little more than calls for alliances of states and kingdoms within Europe as a means of preserving peace, although Cruce's work in the seventeenth century did differ in wishing to encompass all the known regions of the world.

The contract form of world government, characterised by a supranational body, is evident in Kant's *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch*

(1795) which Yunker uses as a key text for a discussion of the world government thesis in the nineteenth century and up until the First World War. Kant's plan, echoing the rationality of the Enlightenment, was built on the assumptions of the unity of mankind and the acceptance of a universal moral code and the toleration of differences: virtues which unfortunately did not always help in the creation of supra-national bodies to preserve peace. With the end of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars which had provided the political backdrop against which Kant had written, the political heads of Europe created a loose diplomatic arrangement of periodic Congresses—the Concert of Europe—rather than a supra-national body along the lines of Kant's suggestions. But although his plan was abjured, it was, in its call for a confederation of democratic states established to achieve peace, a key text in the development of the federalist world government school of thought. However, the century which followed was not especially fertile for world government blueprints, reflecting the relative peace in Europe until 1914 with even the Hague Conferences of 1898 and 1907 being driven more by the Russian Tsar's attempt to restrain military ambitions and spending by other European states than by any progressive peace plan. Two widely influential texts on the dangers of war and armaments prior to 1914 which Yunker does cover are Ivan Bloch's *La Guerre Future* (1898) and Norman Angell's *The Great Illusion* (1910). But while these warned of the catastrophic dangers of modern war they ran counter to a contemporary arms race in Europe where the orthodoxy in government circles was of the necessity of arms, rather than their abandonment.

If peace and world government plans follow wars or are generated against the background of international insecurity, then it is not surprising that the twentieth century produced a stream of ideas on the subject. After 1918, the federalist preference for supra-national structures became standard in plans for world government. Yunker notes that the League of Nations was in part a nod in the direction of Kant in that it comprised a permanent congress of states and had some of the structures but not the powers nor the political will to preserve peace. While not confined to Europe it still lacked universality of both membership and of values where appeals to nationalism and ideology could trump those to humanity. With the onset of the Second World War up to the mid-1950s when the threat of nuclear annihilation became ever present, the interest in world government took on a new significance. Many of the earlier plans and those before the Second World War can be found in the 1944 volume by Wynner and Lloyd, *Searchlight on Peace Plans: Choose Your Road to World Government*, compiled at a time when hopes were high in many quarters that the proposed United Nations Organization would go beyond the structures of the League of Nations and offer those world government enthusiasts the basis of a new order. Alas for those hoping for more, the UN was to be a grave disappointment, rooted

as it was in the dominance of great power politics and from its earliest days an organization beset by the divisions of the Cold War played out in a very open diplomatic forum.

The disenchantment with the post-war order and the development of the Cold War created a high point of interest in world government as Yunker demonstrates in the endnotes, by providing a not exhaustive list of publications related to it in the period. The titles give a flavour of the calls for change in international relations: *Peace Through Law* (1944); *The World State, or The New Order of Common Sense* (1944); *One World in the Making* (1945); *It's up to us, Federal World Government in our Time* (1946); *Preliminary Draft of a World Constitution* (1948); *Which Way to World Government?* (1950); *Foundations of the World Republic* (1953) and *World Federal Government: Why? What? How?* (1954). Yet extolling the virtues of world government as many of these publications did, was not sufficient to dissolve the East–West tensions of the Cold War. The period since its end in 1989 has seen a continuing interest in world government especially as some of the world's problems might only be fully faced through global arrangements, be they supra-national or governmental and associational. Yet there remain many serious objections to the possibility of world government—both in its impracticality: that such an expanding and diverse world population could be brought under the umbrella of a single polity, and even its undesirability: that such a polity, if created, could not be workable without grave infringements on human rights and personal liberty.

However, Yunker still holds out some hope which he places in his own proposal for a Federal Union of Democratic Nations to counter the original proposition that world government is both impractical and not beneficial. This Federal Union emerges as a state entity underwritten by its own constitution with its own political structures of executive, legislative and judicial branches, its own capital city and armed force. Nation states would be members while retaining their own sovereignty that did not impinge on the welfare of others. It would be, for Yunker, the beginning and not the end of the search for world government, a starting point providing “a strong institutional foundation in support of a long-run evolutionary trend toward a higher level of power, authority and effectiveness while retaining its democratic nature.” The realist would see these ideas as echoes of others in earlier plans which came to naught because they were hopelessly unrealistic, and failed to explain to their satisfaction how the political, ideological, social and economic differences between states and peoples, which have been consistent weak spots through the generations of world government plans, might be resolved. The final word for this reviewer on these plans, including Yunker's own, were penned by Gerard Mangone in his work, *The Idea and Practice of World Government* (1951) which Yunker generously cites: they are a fine and noble idea but impractical given the consistent strength

and power of ideological and nationalistic prejudices. These sentiments are perhaps unfortunately no less true today than they were when written sixty years ago.

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