

FAILURES OF THE UN

AS the US Marines waded ashore, challenged only by television lights and cameras that they themselves informed precisely where to wait, former secretary of state George Shultz was making a plea for intervention in the former Yugoslavia as well.

It's all being portrayed, of course, as a "new era" with grand missions ahead for both the US and the UN.

The Somali intervention, both George Bush and Boutros Ghali seem to be suggesting, is an affirmation of the effectiveness of the UN and the virtues of the world's remaining superpower.

Politicians have such a way of complimenting themselves for disasters — even when some of these disasters are of their own making and others they have watched grow to gargantuan crisis proportions.

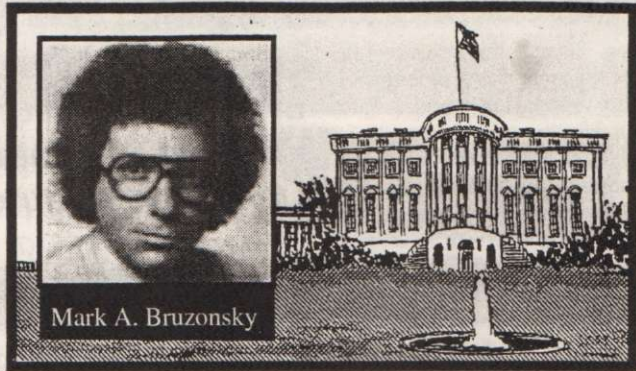
Whatever, for the first time the American military is intervening "to save human lives" in a place where strategic national interests for the US are not at stake — so we are told.

For the first time the United Nations is intervening for "humanitarian" reasons without the approval of the local national government and backed up by the threat of military force — so we are told.

But of course, what we are told by the stripped-suited politicians, and what the big-media repeats ad nauseum, isn't really the whole story — neither in this case nor in so many cases in the past.

For months the UN has been stalemated in Mogadishu — blue-helmeted Pakistanis sitting around the airport while the starvation and anarchy expanded. Indeed, only when the Americans — for their own reasons, of course — decided to intervene did the UN Security Council come to life and, frankly, Ghali's speech to Somalis that "it was the UN" that was coming to save them, at about the very time the Marines

From



Washington

PAINTING COUNTRIES RED, WHITE AND BLUE

evolve institutional mechanisms for the international community to act at times and in ways of its choosing, rather than deferring to the Americans.

The UN has simply failed to evolve beyond an assemblage of talking diplomats and nation-state representatives all pursuing their own limited agendas into an organisation truly representing world society.

even though the UN acted as midwife in 1948 in creating today's problems in the first place.

When Israel massacred Palestinians at the Dome of the Rock and Al-Aqsa Mosque, the Intifada already raging for years, the UN couldn't even manage to send an investigating team because the Israelis simply got away with saying "no".

Left with the dirty and

were coming ashore with US flags on their sleeves, was rather farcical and pathetic.

"Painting countries blue" is how British Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd recently described the growing desirability of using the United Nations to step into "failed" countries to counter anarchy and starvation.

But it is not only "failed" countries that are at issue in all this.

The United Nations itself, looked at from a different perspective than that of Ghali, is itself a massive failure. Worse yet the United Nations seems to be missing its moment once again.

The reality of recent developments is that the painting being done is really in the American colours of the red, white, and blue. The UN has become a convenient agent of legitimisation for the Americans in the post-cold war world. And the UN secretary general is reduced to writing letters to the American president and then complaining to the press when agreements he thought he had with Washington prove not to be the case.

Itself still largely impotent and cowering, the United Nations is getting into the habit of jumping on board American undertakings at the last moment — be they in Kuwait or Somalia or in regard to peace in the Mid-east.

In a sense doing so masks the terrible failures of the UN to

Half a century after its creation, the UN still lacks a standing peacekeeping force of its own and finds itself quite literally stamped and stamped around by today's most powerful nation-states — most especially the "host country", the US, which acts when it wants to and doesn't act when it doesn't want to.

The UN itself doesn't really make decisions; it rather stamps those of others with a seal of approval when convenient and overlooks other unilateral interventions — Grenada, Panama, Nicaragua, Afghanistan — when it's inconvenient to do otherwise.

Moreover, of course, the UN hasn't even figured out a way to get its bills paid on time or even to enforce bill collection from its constituent members.

Again, it's the Americans who are the largest unilateral actor, giving and withholding funds pretty much at will.

Even when it comes to the relatively non-political issue of disaster relief, the UN remains bound by ad hoc procedures always scrambling at the last minute to put together quick-fixes and nearly always after disasters are allowed to expand into catastrophes.

The impotence of today's UN, an institution in many ways held hostage by its host country the United States, could hardly be better symbolised by its near invisibility these days when it comes to the Arab-Israeli "peace process",

thankless jobs, such as those performed by UNRWA and the use of blue-helmeted forces in ceasefire areas others don't wish to enter. The UN is denied any effective role when it comes to the big issues.

When the Americans wouldn't grant Yasser Arafat a visa, the UN once again knuckled under, in this case accepting that it wasn't even master in its own house.

When the crises of recent past years in Biafra, Cambodia, Liberia, Ethiopia, and a whole host of other spots erupted, millions of lives were lost before the UN finally made some feeble attempts in a couple of those places — always much too little, and much too late.

Worst of all, it seems the UN is again missing its moment.

With the cold war over, the Americans facing major economic problems at home, the Russians completely preoccupied, and the Europeans having their hands full as well with problems of their own, it's the perfect time for the United Nations to rebirth itself, the perfect time for the UN to stand up and be counted in a serious way.

Rather than the responsive approach that's been going on whenever the Americans decide to intervene and prefer a UN umbrella, the UN should be telling its member states that it's time for a standing international peacekeeping force, time for a well-funded and ready-to-go disaster relief programme, time for the UN corridors to substitute for those of the American State Department when it comes to international diplomacy.

To the surprise of many, Secretary General Boutros Ghali has shown some signs of life since taking over the job of top international civil servant. But so far his efforts have been marginal, his rhetoric far more substantial than his actions — just as was the case all those years he spent at the Egyptian Foreign Ministry.

If Ghali is serious that he only wants the job for one term, then first of all he doesn't have to worry about being re-elected.

Then secondly he should realise that he holds power at a very crucial time for the UN, at a time when the institution's future course is being charted.

And then thirdly he should realise that his time will pass quickly and he should act boldly and provocatively now without further delay.

The UN itself doesn't really make decisions; it rather stamps those of others with a seal of approval when convenient and overlooks other unilateral interventions — Grenada, Panama, Nicaragua, Afghanistan — when it's inconvenient to do otherwise. The UN has become a convenient agent of legitimisation for the Americans in the post-cold war world. And the UN secretary general is reduced to writing letters to the American president. Itself still largely impotent and cowering, the United Nations is getting into the habit of jumping on board American undertakings at the last moment