

America goes its own way: Dropping out

by [Alan Geyer](#) in the [June 5, 2002](#) issue

The U.S. war against terrorism since September 11 has obscured a longstanding yet growing set of dysfunctional relationships between this nation and most other nations. The U.S. has become disconnected from the interests and perspectives of other nations on every continent due to its isolationism, lack of cooperation, and unilateral actions. While the Bush administration has aggravated this predicament by its disdain for multilateral institutions, the political failure has a much longer history. It is a failure shared by administrations and congressional leaders of both parties. It is a failure reflecting the inconstancy of churches and civic institutions as advocates for international cooperation. And it is a failure bound to affect the war on terrorism itself.

In a 1985 volume analyzing this phenomenon, editor Sanford Ungar (recently inaugurated as president of Goucher College in Baltimore) concluded that “the United States is estranged from the world—separate, aloof, more alone than even the most cynical of pessimistic observers might have predicted in the heyday of American postwar power” (*Estrangement: America and the World*, published by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace).

The mustering of the coalition against terrorism since September 11 may seem to nullify that 1985 assessment. In other fields of international relations, however, our isolation has intensified. Here are just some of the broken connections that have deepened and aggravated our estrangement:

The 1982 Convention on the Law of the Sea would make the precious resources of the oceans a common treasury for all humanity. Originally drafted with bipartisan U.S. support, it was a triumph of outstanding international diplomacy led by a Republican statesman, Elliott Richardson, who had held more cabinet posts than any other American in history. But that convention was then rejected by the U.S. government.

The 1979 Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) was ratified by more than 150 other governments—but not the U.S.

The 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child was ratified by 187 governments—in fact, all except Somalia (which has no functioning government) and the U.S.

The nuclear Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty of 1996 to halt, at least, all nuclear testing and further nuclear weapons development was ratified by all of our NATO allies and by Russia—but rejected in 1999 by vote of the U.S. Senate. This treaty is opposed by the Bush administration, whose recent Nuclear Posture Review not only contemplates developing new nuclear weapons but also entertains the possibility of preemptive nuclear strikes on countries which have renounced nuclear weapons for themselves under the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

The 1997 Kyoto Protocol finally sets targets for reducing the “greenhouse gases” that contribute to global warming—and this nation is the gassiest. That agreement, however, was opposed by some U.S. industries and then by the U.S.

The Statute of the International Criminal Court deals with trying “crimes against humanity,” including genocide and war crimes. It was adopted in Rome in 1998 by 120 nations, including all our NATO allies. But the U.S. voted against it, along with Iraq, Libya and Yemen.

The Ottawa Treaty to Ban Landmines was approved by 142 countries, including all our European allies. The campaign for this treaty was led by an extraordinary American woman, Jody Williams (for which she received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1997), but it is another treaty rejected by the U.S.

UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, is now leading a ten-year effort involving many educational institutions and churches to help create a new international “culture of peace.” However, the U.S. withdrew from UNESCO in 1984 and has never returned.

The UN has established a standard for richer countries to provide at least 7/10 of 1 percent of their gross domestic product in economic aid to the world’s poorest countries. But the current U.S. level is less than 1/10 of 1 percent, which ranks this nation last among the 22 aid-providing nations—although President Bush has agreed to increasing this amount by 50 percent over the next three years.

Every one of these international accords and actions has been supported by the policy positions of our nation's mainline churches—only to be rejected by the government. Taken together, these broken bonds with other nations add up to an extreme unilateralism, isolation and estrangement. Christians, who with St. Paul proclaim a Christ who is “our peace,” a Christ who “breaks down the dividing walls of estrangement,” cannot be heedless of the suffering caused by these broken bonds.

Joseph S. Nye Jr., dean of Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government and a former State and Defense Department official, has soberly addressed these concerns in his just-published book, *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World's Only Superpower Can't Go It Alone*. Nye insists that “on intrinsically cooperative issues” effective solutions “cannot be achieved except by multilateral means.” He includes among such issues global warming, infectious diseases, global financial markets, world trade, weapons of mass destruction, criminal syndicates, narcotics traffic and terrorism.

In the 1940s churches in the U.S., working ecumenically, decisively rallied public support for ratification of the UN Charter. The churches then wanted to ensure that this country would not repeat the disaster of a generation earlier when it dropped out of the League of Nations at its very birth. Dropping out of the League of Nations was clearly one of the contributing causes of World War II. Christians of this generation must seek to overcome this nation's current regression to that bad, old American habit of dropping out of the family of nations—especially when our own power remains so heavily implicated in all those other nations.