In the months immediately preceding the beginning of war in Iraq the United Nations Organization has come under a challenge of the Bush administration. This challenge has been clearly expressed in an article of Richard Perle, the former chairman of the Defense Policy Board at the Pentagon and one of the most outspoken and influential advocates of the war. In the article, which he significantly entitled “Thank God for the Death of the UN,” published in Guardian on March 21, 2003 and reprinted in other papers, Perle accused the United Nations of being ineffective in realizing its objectives. Any criticism of the UN, that in spite of its well-considered principles it was unable to provide foundation of a more secure world order, is, nevertheless, unfounded if it does not consider: firstly, the limitations inherent to the structure of this organization, whose work is based on collective decision making, and, secondly, possible alternatives to it.

To begin with the former, the United Nations Organization has been devised to ensure common security, and is therefore a system in which all member states undertake a common action against any country that threatens the security of another state. The logic of common security is flawless provided that all nations subordinate whatever conflicting interests they may have to the common good defined in terms of collective defense of all member states. In practice, however, the system of collective security of the UN can only function where there is a consensus among those major powers that are permanent members of the Security Council.

For most of the first forty years of the history of the United Nations, the principal members states did not share a consensus in large part because of the immense ideological differences and disagreements between the United States and Soviet Union. A green light for more efficient functioning of the UN was the beginning of the end of the Cold War and “de-ideologizing” of international relations. In March 1987, the five permanent members of the Security Council agreed to make joint efforts to end the war between Iran and Iraq. This was followed by an agreement in the Security Council on the UN plan for Namibia's transition to independence and on the plan to bring stability and peace to Cambodia, and, in 1990, by the decision to repel by force Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. The recent disagreement between major powers, concerning the possession of weapons of mass destruction by Iraq and the necessity of military action against this country, has led to divisions between members of the Security Council and to the failure of any common action. Supporting its action by the alleged and self-styled necessity to implement the Security Council resolution 1441, the United States went to war alone, supported by the at hock constructed “coalition of the willing” and without any formal approval by the UN.

In international politics actions are usually measured by their final outcomes and it is still too early to judge the US military action in Iraq as either a practical success or a failure in introducing to Iraq principles of Western democracy. Weapons of mass destruction, whose destruction was the official reason for war, have not yet been found. It is doubtful whether they will ever be. Nevertheless, what is certain is that based on a dubious legal grounds, this unilateral action of the US, which so many people all over the world have opposed, can be regarded as a threat to a world order, based on the respect for international law. It has already led to immense divisions over Atlantic and the loss of some America’s strongest European allies. Conversely, in his article Perle described it as “the best hope for that order, and the true alternative to the anarchy of the abject failure of the UN.” Can then a military action, undertaken unilaterally (i.e. without the UN support), such action as war in Iraq or, in more general terms, the unilateral pre-emptive action against hostile states and terror groups described in the newly adopted "National Security Strategy of the United States" be a foundation of a secure world order? What are the alternatives to the UN in the face of international anarchy?

Political philosophy offers two classical solutions to the problem of insecurity caused by the situation of the absence of a ruler, literally anarchy, on the international scene. They correspond to the idea of raison d’État (reason of the state), developed in the tradition of political realism, and to the idea of the universal empire.

In the tradition of political realism, as associated with Machiavelli and Hobbes, the impulse of
states to power and self-preservation is a timeless feature of international relations. No state can be permanently secure in an international environment marked by ongoing conflict. Therefore, the attribute most essential for a state to possess is power, that is to say, the ability to maintain itself among other states. Perhaps the greatest problem with realism is that it has a tendency to slip into an extreme version. In the extreme realism of power politics, the state’s egoism and power become glorified, instead of being merely recognized and kept within reasonable limits. In the writings of Hegel, and in nineteenth century historical thought, power politics is idealized, war is praised, and power acquires a moral dimension. In the extreme version, realism, motivated by a state’s security and self-interest, develops a violent tendency that, in case of Germany, led to the affirmation of Machtpolitik and subsequently to two world wars.

Reflection on the conflicting character of international relations can lead to the conclusion that peace among nations can be secured by bringing international relations to an end. Another theoretical solution to the problem of world insecurity is to establish a world state, an universal empire comprising all nations on earth. Advocates of this idea believe that to make the world permanently secure one has to radically transform the existing international system. They base their argument on the analogy with domestic societies. They assume that the conditions of orderly social life are the same among states as they are among human beings in a society, and conclude that to what is needed for perpetual peace is to employ the social contract and to transfer the sovereignties of individual states to a global authority – one which would be as sovereign over individual nations as the individual nations are over their respective territories.

Opponents of a world state have argued that its formation does not sufficiently take into consideration cultural, religious, and national identities that, when suppressed under the umbrella of a global authority, could erupt in the form of revolutions and civil wars. It is therefore doubtful whether life in such a state would be good or even tolerable. Furthermore, they claim that the domestic analogy that lies at the foundation of an argument for a world state does not hold true. The conditions of states in the situation of an absence of a common ruler are not as desperate as that of individual human beings. States can cooperate in anarchy and are not as vulnerable to violent attacks as individuals are. It was the aim of Hedley Bull and of the other members of the English school of international relations, whose lessons remain largely unlearned today, to show that the international anarchy was unique, and could not be compared with the anarchy among individual human beings. In the anarchic international system, states could be linked by mutual obligations. They could thus form an international society, a great society of nations, the greatest practical expression of which is the United Nations.

In the dangerous world in which we live today, an alternative to the UN cannot be a state driven by its national self-interest, a state which violates the norms of international society. To put our trust in such a state is to go back to the Machtpolitik of the nineteenth century with all of its possible negative consequences. A world empire is also an unacceptable alternative. What is needed to keep the world maximally secure is not the transformation of the present society of sovereign states into a world state, nor the corruption of the international society through unilateral actions, but rather making this society stronger by the voluntary limitation of the exercise of national sovereignty on the part of individual states through international institutions, obligations, and good customs.

The uniqueness of the UN lies in the fact that it can make the world safer by enacting multilateral measures. With the increased interdependence of peoples and states, international security has come to mean both protecting people from natural disasters, civil conflict, and massive violations of human rights that may occur within a given state, and, also protecting one state from attack by another. Yet, perhaps the greatest value of the United Nations is not its practical successes in peace-making and peace-building in various parts in the world, or in providing humanitarian relief from disasters, but its contribution to the growth of the universal consciousness of humankind. The force of universality which it promotes is a challenge to national particularism. It provides us with a sense of
universal moral obligation to other humans, an obligation that transcends the limit of national communities.

Without the UN the world in which we live today would be even more dangerous. Therefore, attempts to undermine this organization by affirming individual state sovereignty and idealizing power politics are harmful to the world community as a whole. The idea of protecting individuals and states from harm can be put into practice only through sustained cooperation and an increased community of interests on the part of all major powers. It is only within the society of states that the individual state, however strong, can prosper in a longer run. An international society in the form of the United Nations is the best antidote to the dangers that may prove a grave risks to humankind.