

■ Response to the Passing of UN Resolution 3379

Date: November 10, 1975

Author: Daniel Patrick Moynihan

Genre: speech

Summary Overview

On November 10, 1975, the General Assembly of the United Nations passed Resolution 3379, which “Determines that Zionism is a form of racism and racial discrimination.” The resolution was pushed by Arab and Muslim nations who viewed the creation of the state of Israel in 1948 as a form of colonialism imposed by western imperialist powers. The vote was 72 in favor, 35 against and 32 abstentions. The Soviet Union and the communist bloc supported the resolution, whereas Western Europe opposed it. Israeli United Nations (UN) ambassador Chaim Herzog led the opposition and framed the resolution as an act of anti-Semitism, coming on the anniversary of the 1938 *Kristallnacht*. Passionately supporting Israel was the fiery U.S. ambassador to the UN, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who in a memorable speech after the vote denounced the resolution’s passage as an “abomination of anti-Semitism” and a day of “infamy.”

Defining Moment

By 1975, the United Nations (UN) had grown dramatically due to the decline of European colonialism and the birth of newly independent nations in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Many of these nations became fiercely anti-imperialist. Although most joined the Non-Aligned Movement (nations not officially in either the Western capitalist camp or Eastern communist camp), many sympathized with Marxism and tilted toward the Soviet Union in its Cold War rivalry with the United States. This became especially true during America’s war in Vietnam.

Both the United States and the Soviet Union initially supported the UN partition of Palestine and creation of Israel in 1948. The former viewed the early Zionists’ as liberal democrats, and the latter approved their socialist orientation. Revelations of the Nazi extermination of 6 million Jews during the Holocaust furthered this early sympathy. Both superpowers aided Israel in its 1948 war with its Arab neighbors.

The Soviet Union shifted its position by the 1950s and argued that Israel was the product of Western imperialism. Many newly independent nations of the “Third World” embraced this view of Israel as a colonial enterprise. Opposition to the Jewish state



Daniel Patrick Moynihan in 1975. Photo via Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain.]

intensified after the 1967 “Six-Day War” when Israel came into possession of Palestinian lands in Gaza and the West Bank, as well as Egyptian territory in Sinai Peninsula and Syrian land in the Golan Heights. The number of Palestinian refugees after each Arab-Israeli war grew, and Israel’s refusal to allow them back contrasted with its ardent support for Jewish migration. The rise of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting States (OPEC) further strengthened Arab influence in the emerging Third World.

Daniel Patrick Moynihan was an old-fashioned liberal who viewed America’s war in Vietnam as a well-intentioned mistake and not an outgrowth of imperialism. Moynihan had worked in both Democratic and Republican administrations and viewed 1960s New Left radicalism and its influence on the Democratic Party with disdain. He argued that liberals needed to stop apologizing for America’s role in the world, and proudly champion its liberal institutions and values. Such liberal institutions, he charged, were often missing from the emergent nations that criticized the United States. The new UN ambassador was especially contemptuous of criticism of Israel, which he viewed as the lone democracy in the Middle East.

In June 1975, Arab delegates had succeeded in getting an anti-Zionist clause inserted into the Declaration on the Equality of Women at the World Conference of the International Women’s Year in Mexico City. Then in the fall, the leader of Uganda, the flamboyant and brutal Field Marshall Idi Amin Dada took to the floor of the General Assembly and declared “America has been colonized by Zionists,” adding, “I call for the expulsion of Israel from the United Nations and the extinction of Israel as a state.” Moynihan condemned Amin, who had recently expelled all Asians from Uganda, as “racist murderers.”

Next, the General Assembly’s “Third Committee,” or Social, Humanitarian and Cultural Committee, passed a “Zionism is a form of Racism” resolution, almost guaranteeing passage in the General Assembly.

Enraged, Moynihan decided to dispense with traditional diplomatic politesse and behind-the-scenes maneuvering, favored by his boss, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, and give a full-throated denunciation of the resolution.

After the resolution’s passage, Moynihan took to the rostrum and denounced the resolution as an anti-Semitic act, which would discredit the UN and the cause of human rights. Opponents scoured at Moynihan and even allies like the British UN ambassador Ivor Richard mildly criticized him, likening Moynihan’s rhetorical shoot-from-the-hip style to Wyatt Earp at the O.K. Corral. However, in the United States Moynihan received widespread plaudits and his speech helped pave the way for his successful 1976 run for U.S. senator from New York.

Author Biography

Daniel Patrick Moynihan was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma, on March 16, 1927. His family soon moved to New York where he grew up. Moynihan attended City College and then enlisted in the U.S. Navy where he served from 1944–1947. Moynihan received his BS, BA, MA, and PhD from Tufts University and attended the London School of Economics on a Fulbright scholarship. In 1955, Moynihan married Elizabeth Brennan with whom he had three children. He became a tenured professor at Harvard University where he served as director of the Joint Center for Urban Studies. He served in both the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. Working in the Labor Department in 1965, Moynihan wrote a controversial paper, “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action.” He went on to serve in the Nixon administration as counselor to the president and Urban Affairs advisor. He served as ambassador to India in 1973–1975 and as ambassador to the UN in 1975–1976. In 1976, Moynihan was elected a U.S. senator from New York, a seat he held until 2001. He died in 2003.



Historical Document

Daniel Patrick Moynihan—Response to the Passing of UN Resolution 3379

UN Headquarters

10 November 1975

There appears to have developed in the United Nations the—the practice for a number of countries to combine for the purpose of doing something outrageous, and thereafter, the outrageous thing having been done, to profess themselves outraged by those who have the temerity to point it out, and subsequently declare themselves innocent of any wrong-doing in consequence of it having been brought about wholly in reaction to the “insufferable” acts of those who pointed the wrong-doing out in the first place. Out of deference to these curious sensibilities, the United States chose not to speak in advance of this vote.

We speak in its aftermath and in tones of the utmost concern.

The United States rises to declare before the General Assembly of the United Nations and before the world that it does not acknowledge, it will not abide by, it will never acquiesce in this infamous act.

Not three weeks ago, the United States Representative in the Social, Humanitarian, and Cultural Committee—and what—with what irony those terms ring on our ears today—pleaded in measured and fully considered terms for the United Nations not to do this thing. It was, he said, “obscene.” It is something more today, for the furtiveness with which this obscenity first appeared among us has been replaced by a shameless openness.

There will be time enough to contemplate the harm this act will have done the United Nations. Historians will do that for us, and it is sufficient for the moment only to note one foreboding fact: A great evil has been loosed upon the world. The abomination of anti-Semitism—as this year’s Nobel Peace Laureate Andrei Sakharov observed in Moscow just a few days ago—the abomination of anti-Semitism has been given the appearance of international sanction. The General Assembly today grants symbolic amnesty—and more—to the murderers of the six million European Jews. Evil enough in itself, but more ominous by far is the realization that now presses upon us—the realization that if there were no General Assembly, this could never have happened.

As this day will live in infamy, it behooves those who sought to avert it to declare their thoughts so that historians will know that we fought here, that we were not small in number—not this time—and that while we lost, we fought with full knowledge of what indeed would be lost.

Nor should any historian of the event, nor yet any who have participated in it, suppose that we have fought only as governments, as chancelleries, and on an issue well removed from the concerns of our respective peoples. Others will speak for their nations, as others have. I will speak for mine.

In all our postwar history there has not been another issue which has brought forth such unanimity of American public opinion. The President of the United States has from the first been explicit: This must not happen. The Congress of the United States in a measure unanimously adopted in our Senate and sponsored by 436 of 437 Representatives in our House, declared its utter opposition. Following only American Jews themselves, the American trade union movement was first to the fore in denouncing this infamous undertaking. Next, one after another, the great private institutions of American life pronounced anathema on this evil thing—and most particularly the Christian churches have done so. Reminded that the United Nations was born in the struggle against just such abominations as we are committing today—the wartime alliance of the United Nations dates from 1942—the United Nations Association of the United States for this first time in its history has appealed directly to each of the 141 other delegations in New York not to do this unspeakable thing.

The proposition to be sanctioned by a resolution of the General Assembly is that “Zionism is a form of racism and racial discrimination.” Now this is a lie. But it is a lie which the United Nations has now declared to be a truth—and so the actual truth must be restated.

The first point to be made—and here I must respectfully take issue with my distinguished colleague from Kuwait, a man genuinely distinguished for his scholarship, who nonetheless on this matter is simply wrong—the first point to be made is that the United Nations has declared Zionism to be racism without ever having defined racism. “Sentence first—verdict afterwards,” as the Queen of Hearts said.¹ But this is not Wonderland, but a real world, where there are real consequences to folly and venality. Just on Friday, the President of the General Assembly, speaking on behalf of Luxembourg, warned not only of the trouble which would follow from the adoption of this resolution but of its essential irresponsibility—for, he noted, Members have wholly different ideas as to what they are condemning. “It seems to me,” he said—and to his lasting honor he said it when there was still time—“It seems to me that before a body like this takes a decision they should agree very clearly on what they are approving or condemning, and it takes more time” (end of quote).

Lest I be unclear, the United Nations has in fact on several occasions defined “racial discrimination.” The definitions have been loose, but recognizable. It is racism—racism incomparably the more serious charge: racial discrimination is a practice; racism is a doctrine. It is *racism* that has never been defined. Indeed, the term has only recently appeared in the United Nations General Assembly documents. The one occasion on that we have been able to find, and which we know it to have been discussed, was the 1644th meeting of the Third Committee on December 16, 1968, in connection with the report of the Secretary-General on the status of the international convention on the elimination of all forms of racial discrimination.

On that occasion—to give some feeling for the intellectual precision with which the matter was being treated—the question arose, as to what should be the relative positioning of the terms “racism” and “Nazism” in a number of the preambular paragraphs. The distinguished delegate from Tunisia argued (and I quote) that “racism” should go first because (quote) “Nazism was a form of racism.” Not so, said the no less distinguished delegate from the Union Soviet Socialist Republics. For, he explained (and I quote), “Nazism contained all the main elements of racism within its ambit and should be mentioned first.” This is to say that racism was merely a form of Nazism.

The discussion wound to its weary and inconclusive end, and we are left with nothing to guide us for even this one discussion of racism confined itself to word orders in preambular paragraphs, and did not at all touch on the meaning of the words as such. Still, one cannot but ponder the situation we have made for ourselves in the context of the Soviet statement on that not-so-distant occasion. If, as the distinguished delegate declared, [MP] Racism is a form of Nazism—and if, as this resolution declares, [mp] Zionism is a form of racism—then we have step to step taken ourselves to the point of proclaiming—the United Nations is solemnly proclaiming—that [C] Zionism is a form of Nazism.²

What we have here is a lie—a political lie of a variety well known to the twentieth century, and scarcely exceeded in all that annal of untruth and outrage. The lie is that Zionism is a form of racism. The overwhelmingly clear truth is that is it not.

The word “racism” is a creation of the English language, and relatively new to it. It is not, for instance, to be found in the Oxford English Dictionary. The term derives from relatively new doctrines—all of them discredited—concerning the human population of the world to the effect that there are significant biological differences among clearly identifiable groups, and that these differences establish, in effect, different levels of humanity. Racism, as defined by Webster’s Third New International Dictionary, is, (and I quote), “The assumption that...traits and capacities are determined by biological race and that races differ decisively from one another,” (unquote). It further involves

(quote), “a belief in the inherent superiority of a particular race and its right to domination over others,” (again unquote).

This meaning is clear. It is equally clear that this assumption, this belief, has always been altogether alien to the political and religious movement known as Zionism. As a strictly political movement, Zionism was established only in 1897, although there’s a clearly legitimate sense in which its origins are indeed ancient. For example, many branches of Christianity have always held that from the standpoint of the biblical prophets, Israel would be reborn one day.

But the—the modern Zionist movement arose in Europe in the context of a general upsurge of national consciousness and aspiration that overtook most of the peoples of Central and Eastern Europe after 1848, and that in time spread to all of Africa and Asia. It was, to those persons of the Jewish religion, a Jewish form of what today is called a national liberation movement. Probably, a majority of those persons who became active Zionists and sought to emigrate to Palestine were born within the confines of Czarist Russia, and it was only natural for Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko to deplore, as he did in 1948, in the 299th meeting of the Security Council, the act by Israel’s neighbors of (and I quote) “sending their troops into Palestine and carrying out military operations aimed”—in Mr. Gromyko’s words—“at the suppression of the national liberation movement in Palestine.”³

Now it was the singular nature—if I am not mistaken, it was the unique nature—of this national liberation movement that in contrast with the movements that preceded it, those of that time, and those that have come since, it defined its members not in terms of birth, but of belief. That is to say, it was not a movement of the Irish to free Ireland, or of the Polish to free Poland, not a movement of the Algerians to free Algeria, nor of Indians to free India. It was not a movement of persons connected by historic membership in a genetic pool of the kind that enables us to speak loosely but not meaninglessly of, say, the Chinese people; nor yet of diverse groups occupying the same territory which enables us to speak of the American people with no greater indignity to truth.

To the contrary, Zionists defined themselves merely as Jews, and declared to be Jewish anyone born of a Jewish mother or—and this is the absolutely crucial fact—anyone who converted to Judaism—which is to say, in the terms of International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, adopted by the 20th General Assembly, anyone—regardless of (quote) “race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin....”⁴

The State of Israel, which in time was the creation of the Zionist Movement, has been extraordinary for nothing so much as the range of (what are called sometimes) “racial stocks” from which it has drawn its citizenry. There are

black Jews, brown Jews, white Jews, Jews from the Orient, and Jews from the West. Most such persons could be said to have been “born” Jews, just as most Presbyterians and most Hindus are “born” to their faith. But there are many Jews who are just converts. And with a consistency in the matter which surely attests to the importance of this issue to that religious and political culture, Israeli courts have held that a Jew who converts to another religion is no longer a Jew. In the meantime the population of Israel also includes large numbers of non-Jews, among them Arabs both of the Muslim and Christian religions, and of Christians and others of national origins. Many of these persons are citizens of Israel, and those who are not can become citizens by legal procedures very much like those which obtain in a typical nation of Western Europe.

Now I should wish to be understood—wish to be understood that I am here making one point and one point only, which is: Whatever else Zionism may be, it is not and cannot be “a form of racism.” In logic, the State of Israel could be or could become many things, theoretically, including many things undesirable, but it could not be and could not become racist unless it ceased to be Zionist.

Indeed, the idea that the Jews are a “race” (quote, unquote) was invented not by Jews but by those who hated Jews. The idea of Jews as a race was invented by nineteenth century anti-Semites such as Houston Steward Chamberlain and Edouard Drumont, who saw that in an increasingly secular age, which is to say an age which made for fewer distinctions between people based on religion, the old religions grounds for anti-Semitism were losing force. New justifications were needed for excluding and persecuting Jews, and so the idea of Jews as a race rather than as a religion was born. It was a contemptible idea at the beginning, and no civilized person would be associated with it. To think that it is an idea now endorsed by the United Nations is to reflect on what civilization has come to.

It is precisely [a] concern for civilization, for civilized values that are or should be precious to all mankind, that arouses us at this moment to such special passion. What we have at stake here is not merely the honor and the legitimacy of the State of Israel—although a challenge to the legitimacy of any Member nation ought always to arouse the vigilance of all Members of the United Nations—for a yet more important matter is at issue, which is the integrity of that whole body of moral and legal precepts which we know as human rights.

The terrible lie that has been told here today will have terrible consequences. Not only will people begin to say, indeed they have already begun to say, that the United Nations is a place where lies are told, but—but far more serious, grave and perhaps irreparable harm will be done to the cause of human rights. The harm will arise first because it will strip from racism the precise and abhorrent meaning that it still precariously holds today. How will peoples of the

world feel about racism and about the need to struggle against it, when they are told that it is an idea as broad as to include the Jewish national liberation movement?

As this lie spreads, it will do harm in a second way. Many of the members of the United Nations owe their independence in no small part to the notion of human rights, as it has spread from the domestic sphere to the international sphere, and exercised its influence over the old colonial powers. We are now coming into a time when that independence is likely to be threatened again. There will be new forces, some of them arising now, visible now, new prophets and new despots, who will justify their actions with the help of just such distortions of words as we have sanctioned here today. Today, we have drained the word “racism” of its meaning. Tomorrow, terms like “national self-determination” and “national honor” will be perverted in the same way to serve the purposes of conquest and exploitation. And when these claims begin to be made—as they already have begun to be made—it is the small nations of the world whose integrity will suffer. And how will the small nations of the world defend themselves? And on what grounds will others be moved to defend and protect them, when the language of human rights, the only language by which the small can be defended, is no longer believed and no longer has a power of its own?

There is this danger, and then a final danger which is the most serious of all—which is that the damage we now do to the idea of human rights and the language of human rights could well be irreversible.

The idea of human rights as we know it today is not an idea which has always existed in human affairs. It is an idea which appeared at a specific time in the world, and under very special circumstances. It appeared when European philosophers of the seventeenth century began to argue that man was a being whose existence was independent from that of the State, and that he need join a political community only if he did not lose by that association more than he gained. From this very specific political philosophy stemmed the idea of political rights, of claims that the individual could justly make against the State. It was because the individual was seen as so separate from the State that he could make legitimate demands upon it.

That was the philosophy from which the idea of domestic and international rights sprang. But most of the world does not hold with that philosophy now. Most of the world believes in newer modes of political thought, in philosophies that do not accept the individual as distinct from and prior to the State, in philosophies that therefore do not provide any justification for the idea of human rights and philosophies that have no words by which to explain their value. If we destroy the words that were given to us by past centuries, we will not have words to replace them, for philosophy today has no such words.

But there are those of us who have not forsaken these older words, still so new to much of the world; not forsaken them now, not forsaken them—not here, not anywhere, not ever.

The United States of America declares that it does not acknowledge, it will not abide by, it will never acquiesce in this infamous act.

Thank you, Mr. President.

[Source: gpo.gov.]



Document Analysis

Moynihan contextualizes his speech within the long history of anti-Semitism and delivers it in the spirit of moral witness. He declares, “The United States rises to declare before the General Assembly of the United Nations and before the world that it does not acknowledge, it will not abide by, it will never acquiesce in this infamous act.”

He explicitly notes that he is speaking to historians and wants to highlight that unlike those who in the past did not speak up when anti-Semitism was on the march, this time would be different. He intones, “historians will know that we fought here, that we were not small in number—not this time—and that while we lost, we fought with the full knowledge of what indeed would be lost.”

Moynihan asserts that Americans are of one voice in denouncing the measure: “In all our postwar history there has not been another issue which has brought forth such unanimity of American public opinion.” From President Gerald R. Ford through the U.S. Senate, which unanimously condemned the UN resolution, to the U.S. House, which did so with 436 out 437 representatives, Americans were largely uniform in their condemnation, including, as Moynihan notes, labor unions and Christian churches.

Moynihan points out the resolution never defines racism. Moynihan was a Harvard professor known for his erudition. Alluding to *Alice in Wonderland*, he quotes the Queen of Hearts: “Sentence first—verdict afterwards.” He proceeds to review the history of Zionism and argues that Zionists always rejected a biological definition of the Jewish people, which came instead from their enemies. He refers to a previous debate in the UN on whether Nazism was a form of racism or vice versa, leading to what Moynihan views as an absurdity, that “Zionism is a form of Nazism.”

Moynihan points out, “There are black Jews, brown Jews, white Jews, Jews from the Orient, and Jews from the West.” Jews remain Jewish, he argues, due to religious heritage unless they convert to another religion. None of which means that Israel cannot do negative things, but it does mean that the UN resolution is inaccurate, indeed “a lie.” He proclaims, “the State of Israel could be or could become many things, theoretically, including many things undesirable, but it

could not be and could not become racist unless it ceased to be Zionist.”

Moynihan concludes by portraying the resolution with its weaponized definition of racism as an attack on notions of human rights tracing back to the Enlightenment. If anything, he asserts, it “will strip from racism the precise and abhorrent meaning that it still precariously holds today.” Moreover, it will damage the image of the UN, a forum for the defense of human rights, as “a place where lies are told.”

The General Assembly’s arguably imprecise and polemical definition of Zionism opened the door for Moynihan’s eloquent denunciation. It also allowed Moynihan to sidestep the dispossession of Palestinian people of their land and discrimination against Palestinians in Israeli-occupied territories. In addition, the conspiratorial, anti-Semitic rhetoric of resolution supporters like Ida Amin made it easy for Moynihan to reframe the Arab-Israeli conflict from a focus on Palestinian self-determination to the latest installment in the long history of anti-Semitism.

Moynihan’s speech against UN Resolution 3379 is thus notable for its strong opposition to the resolution. Moynihan argued that the resolution was unjust and harmful, criticizing it for singling out Israel and undermining the legitimacy of Jewish self-determination. His speech emphasized the importance of supporting Israel’s right to exist and opposing discrimination against it. The speech is remembered for its principled stance defending Israel and challenging the resolution’s underlying premise.

As the Cold War wound down and Middle East negotiations made a tenuous start, the UN in 1991 repealed resolution 3379. Many nations that had voted for the 1975 resolution reversed themselves.

—Robert Surbrug, PhD

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