

## When will we finally have a world government?

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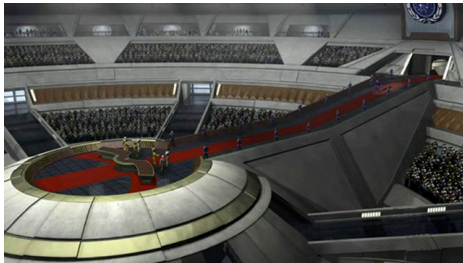
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Political scientists and science fiction writers alike have long been taken with the idea that humans would one day form a global government. Yet few of us take this prospect very seriously, often dismissing it as an outright impossibility or very far off in the future. Given the rapid pace of globalization, however, it would seem that humanity is inexorably headed in this direction. So how long will it take us to build a world government? We talked to an expert to find out.



*Top image of Star Trek's United Federation of Planets council chamber courtesy CBS.*

To help us better understand this issue, we contacted sociologist James Hughes from Trinity College in Connecticut. Hughes, an ardent supporter of global government, feels that it's an idea whose time has come.

"We need world government for the same reason that we need government in general," he told us. "There are a number of things — what we can agree are collective goods — that individuals, markets, voluntary organizations, and local governments aren't able to produce — and which can only be provided through the collective action of states."

Hughes, whose thinking was significantly influenced by the Star Trekian vision of a global-scale liberal democracy, argues that there are a number of things that only a world government is capable of doing — like ending nuclear proliferation, ensuring global security, intervening to end genocide, and defending human rights. He also believes that it will take a global regime to finally deal with climate change, and that it's the best chance we have to launch civilization-scale projects, including the peaceful and controlled colonization of the solar system.

The trick, he says, is to get there. But by all accounts, it appears that we're on our way.

### **The thrust of history**

Indeed, it certainly looks as if humanity is naturally headed in this direction; the prospect of a global government has been on the political radar for centuries.

The ancient Greeks and Romans prophesied of a single common political authority for all of humanity, as did many philosophers of the European Enlightenment, especially Immanuel Kant.



More recently, the urge has manifest in the form of international organizations like the League of Nations, which later re-emerged as the United Nations — efforts that were seen as a way to bind the international community together and prevent wars from occurring.

But today, cynicism rules. The great powers, countries like the United States, Russia, and China, feel they have the most to lose by deferring to a higher, more global-scale authority. It's for this and other reasons that the UN has been completely undermined.

But as Hughes points out, opposition or not, the thrust of history certainly points to the achievement of a world government. Citing the work of [Robert Wright](#) and [Steven Pinker](#), Hughes argues that our units of government are increasingly expanding to cover larger numbers of people and larger territories — a trend that has encouraged the flourishing of commerce and the suppression of violence.

A quick survey shows that the world is undergoing a kind of political consolidation. In addition to cultural and economic globalization, human societies are also bringing their political entities together. Various regions of the world have already undergone successful unions, the most prominent being China. The United States has already done it, but it took a hundred years and a civil war that killed 2% of its citizens.

And of course, there's Europe. It's currently undergoing a well-earned and peaceful political unification process. But like Americans, Europeans didn't take the easy path. The two World Wars of the twentieth century are often seen as a part of the same overarching conflict — a European civil war in which various colonial, political, and ideological interests fought to force the direction of the consolidation process.

"The process is messy and fitful, but inexorable," says Hughes. "Every time Europe seems ready to unravel, the logic of a tighter union pushes them forward — as it did just last week into the new [European banking union agreements](#)."

But as Hughes notes, the problems Europe faces in convincing states to give up sovereignty to transnational authorities are precisely the same problems that are faced at the global level — but with a hundred times the difficulty.

"That is if this century doesn't create new economic, cultural and communication forces for political globalization, and then new catastrophic threats to make the need for global governance inescapable, which it is very likely to do," says Hughes. And by "catastrophic threats," he's referring to the ongoing perils of climate change, terrorism, and emerging technologies.

And indeed, there are other examples of political consolidation outside of Europe. Africa is slowly but surely moving towards an African Union, as is South America. North America is currently bound by NAFTA, and Canada has even considered forging an agreement with the EU.

### **The end of isolationism**

As Hughes is quick to point out, the threat of being shunned and outcast by the larger international community is a powerful motivator for a country to adopt more beneficent policies.

"This has provided an ecological advantage to larger governments and federal structures so that holdouts like Burma eventually give up their isolation," he says. "The irony of the process is that the creation of federal transnational structures supports the political independence of local groups."

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Without the political pressure and direct military intervention of NATO, the European Union, and the United Nations, says Hughes, we would have never realized an independent Kosovo, South Sudan, or East Timor. Moreover, he argues, if Turks weren't anxious to remain on good terms with Europe and other international actors, they would

likely be far more repressive to the Kurds — and the same is probably true vis-à-vis Israelis and Palestinians, and other conflicts.

"Transnational governance already puts pressure on the nation-states that limit how much repression they can enact against minorities, but it is obviously inadequate when we are still powerless to help Tutsis, Tibetans, Chinese Muslims, or Chechens," says Hughes. "The stronger our transnational judiciaries, legislatures, and military and economic enforcement of world law gets, the more effectively we can protect minority rights."

Moreover, the withering away of the sovereign nation-state could be seen as a good thing. As Kenneth Waltz noted in his seminal 1959 book, [\*Man, the State, and War\*](#), the ongoing presence of the traditional nation-state will only continue to heighten the possibility of armed conflict.

Hughes agrees. He sees political globalization as a developmental path that will eventually limit [national] government powers.

"As George Orwell graphically depicted in *1984*, the endless pitting of nation-states against one another is the most powerful rationale for the power of oppressive government," he told us.

### **A danger of global repression?**

There is, of course, a dark side to having a global government. There's the potential, for example, for a singular and all-powerful regime to take hold, one that could be brutally oppressive — and with no other nation states to counter its actions.



It's well known, for example, that the Nazis envisioned a global government, what the democracies correctly assessed as a threat to liberal values, democracy, freedom of

thought — and the lives of millions (if not billions) of innocent people. As a result of the ensuing tragedy, some critics of global government warn that we shouldn't put all our eggs in one political basket. Having sovereign and politically disparate nation-states is a safeguard against the rise of a monolithic and all-encompassing regime.

But Hughes contends that political expansion has helped to suppress despotism and the defense of individual and minority rights — from the establishing of voting rights for black Americans to the European Court of Justice's decisions on reproductive and sexual minority rights.

"That was not, of course, the case with the [former] Soviet Union, so the anxiety that a powerful United Nations full of undemocratic states would be an anti-democratic force in the world was entirely justified during the Cold War," he told io9. "While the spread of democracy has made a liberal democratic global federalism increasingly likely, progressives will nonetheless sometimes face issues where global policy would be reactionary, and local autonomy needs to be defended until the balance of forces change[s]."

Indeed, should a global governance arise, it would be prudent to enshrine fundamental constitutional rights and freedoms to prevent an authoritarian or totalitarian catastrophe. And at the same time, charters should be implemented to guarantee the rights of minority groups.

### **Global government when?**

It's obviously difficult to predict when a global government can be achieved given that there's no guarantee that it will ever happen. As noted, the great powers will be very reluctant to give up what they consider to be sovereignty rights. And in the case of China and other countries, there are other potential deal-breakers, such as the ongoing isolationist urge, xenophobia, and incompatible political/ideological beliefs.

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But given the pace of accelerating change across virtually all human domains, it may happen sooner than we think. It's not unreasonable to predict some manner of global governance taking shape in the latter half of the 21st century.

At the same time, however, a global government won't happen merely because it's deemed desirable.

"Without a vision the people perish," says Hughes. "If we want to see democratic globalization we have to openly point towards it as the goal."

He recommends that supporters join world federalist organizations like the [Citizens for Global Solutions](#), the [Union of European Federalists](#), or the [World Federalist Movement](#).

"Advocates should put global federalist solutions forward as the most obvious way to address global problems — even if such solutions appear currently chimerical. The world is changing quickly and what appears utopian today may appear obvious tomorrow," he says.

We asked Hughes if he thinks that global governance can actually be achieved.

"I do believe it is possible to eventually achieve a global directly-elected legislature, complemented by global referenda and a global judiciary, controlling a global law-enforcement military, and supported by global taxes like the Tobin Tax," he responded.

But there are a lot of other ways that political globalization can provide peace and prosperity short of that.

For example, progress could be measured by the incremental strengthening of all the agencies of transnational governance, from regional bodies like the EU and African Union, to treaty enforcement mechanisms like the WTO, IAEA and ITU, to the United Nations.

"I believe all those bodies will grow in importance and clout over the coming century," he told us, "propelled by the growth of transnational political movements, such as the world federalist movement, NGOs, the Socialist International, and other social movements."

*Other images: [Makaristos](#), Mohamed Nureldin Abdallah / Reuters, PBS, CBS.*