The Tattered Tapestry of International Law

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Symposium Introduction:

The Tattered Tapestry of International Law

William J. Aceves*

This Symposium was convened long before the tragic events of September 11, 2001. And yet, the events of that day still resonate throughout these pages. The tragedy revealed, once more, the tattered tapestry of international law.

International Law Weekend - West was convened on January 26, 2001 at Pepperdine Law School by the American Branch of the International Law Association ("ABILA") and the Pepperdine Law Review. While the ABILA has presented annual conferences on the East Coast for many years, this was the first such conference held on the West Coast. Indeed, the goal of the Symposium organizers was to promote a fruitful discussion of international law on this forgotten coast. The Symposium joined scholars

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1. The International Law Association was founded in 1873 as a private organization devoted to the study of international law. It has over forty national branches throughout the world. The American Branch of the International Law Association ("ABILA") was established in 1922. The ABILA consists of several committees that study and address such issues as arbitration, arms control, commercial law, environmental law, extradition, human rights, intellectual property, and trade.

2. The American Society of International Law has exhibited a similar East Coast preference in the location of its Annual Meetings.

3. The International Law Weekend - West organizing committee, all West Coast residents, consisted of William Aceves, Jeffery Atik, Lee Boyd, William Dodge, Gregory Fox, Alan Kindred,
and practitioners in a dialogue designed to bridge geographic as well as disciplinary divides.4

This Symposium Issue addresses a variety of topics that were raised at International Law Weekend - West, including dispute settlement, ethnic cleansing, intellectual property, labor rights, trade, and sports law.5 At first glance, there does not appear to be a common thread among these disparate topics. It is difficult to imagine any relationship, for example, between the mechanisms for sports law arbitration and the consequences of ethnic cleansing. The connection between ad hoc international criminal tribunals and dispute settlement panels is equally unclear. In this respect, the articles in this Symposium Issue mirror the diverse theory and practice of international law.

A careful reading, however, reveals that each article in this Symposium Issue represents a separate strand of international law. In turn, each strand expresses a distinct set of norms, rules, and institutions. When woven together, these strands form the tapestry of international law.6 It is instructive, therefore, to highlight the common features of these disparate strands.

Norms. International law displays a diverse set of norms that regulate a myriad of activities. These norms express principles of conduct, and they operate at two levels.7 The primary norms express basic values. Examples of primary norms include labor rights, the right to life, and the right to be free from torture.8 The secondary norms function to promote

Charles Siegal, and Beth van Schaack.


implementation of the primary norms. Examples of secondary norms include such concepts as sovereignty and *pacta sunt servanda*.  

**Rules.** This cacophony of norms is reified through a diverse set of rules. This process of reification can occur through treaty development or through the emergence of customary international law. Rules are significant because they formalize the underlying norms. Rules, however, can develop as both hard law and soft law. That is, they can establish binding or nonbinding obligations. Examples of rules include the United Nations Charter and the Uniform Domain Name Dispute Resolution Policy as well as nascent rules such as the Draft Hague Judgments Convention.

**Institutions.** The institutions of international law are as diverse as its underlying norms and rules. There is, however, a corporeal presence—instutions maintain a physical existence. From national tribunals to international organizations, the institutions of international law facilitate the implementation of its reified rules. Institutions perform a variety of functions; they can clarify property rights, promote transparency and information exchange, monitor compliance, mediate disputes, and enforce the rules. Examples of institutions include NAFTA Chapter 11 panels, ad hoc international criminal tribunals, and the Court of Arbitration for Sport.

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10. Like norms, rules can operate at several levels. See FREDERICK SCHAUER, *PLAYING BY THE RULES: A PHILOSOPHICAL EXAMINATION OF RULE-BASED DECISION-MAKING IN LAW AND IN LIFE* (1991); HART, supra note 7, at 91-94.


The tapestry of international law, therefore, is crafted from diverse strands of norms, rules, and institutions. Each new strand that develops further strengthens the tapestry. As strands fade or disappear, however, the tapestry begins to unravel. In this respect, international law is not unique; it shares these attributes with its domestic analogs.

The events of September 11, 2001 reveal the fragile nature of the tapestry of international law. They also raise serious questions about its continued viability. Can the tapestry survive the destruction of that day? Will the norms of democracy and human rights be severed from the tapestry as countries respond in more draconian ways to the threat of terrorism? Are new rules necessary to address such horrific acts of violence? Can its institutions develop effective mechanisms to prevent further acts of terrorism?

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16. Contemporary international relations scholarship would define the strands of international law as institutions. See Lisa L. Martin and Beth A. Simmons, *Theories and Empirical Studies of International Institutions*, 52 INT'L ORG. 729 (1998). In contrast, early international relations scholarship would refer to the strands as regimes. A regime is often defined as a set of principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures around which actor expectations converge in a given issue-area. See *INTERNATIONAL REGIMES* 1 (Stephen D. Krasner ed., 1983).


terrorism? Has the purported clash of civilizations torn the tapestry into competing displays?

Through its diversity, this Symposium Issue highlights the many strands that form the tapestry of international law. As scholars and practitioners, we must recognize the fragile nature of its interwoven strands. It is our responsibility to ensure that they do not unravel.

