We read all the time that some person or organization in power should be "held accountable." Such demands are made on the UN Secretary-General, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Board of Directors of Enron, the President of the United States, and sometimes even non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as Greenpeace. But what does this mean in world politics, where democratic accountability through elections is lacking and legal means of checking power wielders are fragmented and often ineffective? Can abuses of power in world politics be controlled through processes of accountability, or is "accountability talk" just hot air? My argument is that although accountability-based criticisms in world politics are often misplaced, accountability is a meaningful concept. Properly applied, it can be a useful tool to limit abuses of power.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

Accounting for Accountability

An accountability relationship is one in which an individual, group, or other entity demands that an agent report on his or her activities and can impose costs on the agent. In an authorized or institutionalized accountability relationship, the requirement to report and the right to sanction are mutually accepted. Other accountability relationships are contested: individuals, groups, or entities claim the right to hold agents accountable, but the agents do not recognize a corresponding obligation.

Democratic accountability within a constitutional system is a relationship in which power wielders are accountable to broad publics. Applied to world politics, democratic accountability could be conceptualized as a system in which agents whose actions make a sufficiently great impact on the lives of people in other societies must report to those people and be subject to sanctions from them, according to political science professor David Held.

But accountability need not be democratic. Indeed, it can also be hierarchical, in which subordinates are accountable to superiors, or pluralistic, as in Madisonian constitutionalism. Actual systems of accountability in constitutional democracies combine all three sources of accountability--democratic, hierarchic, and pluralistic.

Moreover, internal accountability involves arrangements within institutions to hold component entities accountable, usually because the accountability holder is providing legitimacy or financial
resources to the agent. Because providing authorization and support creates means of influence, such influence can be used to close any "accountability gap" that may open between normative values of internal accountability and actual practice.

In external accountability, the entity is accountable to people who are outside the entity and whose lives the entity affects. The normative question then arises: should the acting entity be accountable to all those it affects? If so, an empirical question arises: given the valid claim for accountability, is accountability achieved or is there an accountability gap?

Rulers generally dislike being held accountable. Yet they often have reasons to submit to accountability mechanisms. In a democratic or pluralistic system, accountability may be essential to maintaining public confidence, and some degree of accountability in any system may be necessary to maintain the credibility of the agent. That is, the ruler may find other dimensions of power more important than lack of accountability. Furthermore, constitutional systems may be designed to limit abuses of power without reducing the amount of influence the leaders have when action is necessary. But we can expect power holders to seek to avoid accountability when they can do so without jeopardizing other goals. And in the absence of a constitutional system, the ability to avoid being held externally accountable can be viewed as one dimension of power. In other words, accountability is itself a power term. To discuss accountability is to discuss power.

In world politics, internal accountability may or may not be strong, depending on whether states or international organizations have constitutional arrangements that promote it. With respect to powerful states, however, external accountability is weak. It goes almost without saying that where conflicts of interest are pronounced, powerful states will not let themselves be held accountable to their adversaries. The United States is not about to be held accountable to Al Qaeda for US anti-terrorism tactics. It is also true that asymmetries of power attenuate accountability. Europe will not be held accountable for its immigration policies to the countries of origin of would-be immigrants. Only when they have interests in holding others accountable—as with World Trade Organization (WTO) policies—are powerful states disposed to let themselves be held accountable.

What entities need to be held accountable in world politics, and how could this objective be achieved?

Accountability of Multilateral Organizations

Consider the entities conventionally held accountable on a transnational basis. The most prominent, judging from demonstrations, press coverage, and even scholarly articles, are major inter-governmental organizations concerned with economic globalization: the European Union, World Bank, IMF, and WTO. Champions of "more accountability" make these organizations major targets, which certainly have deficiencies in accountability and certainly do not meet the standards of accountability for the best-functioning democracies of our era. But ironically, these entities seem to be relatively accountable compared with other key global actors.
These economic institutions are internally accountable to states on the basis of authorization and support. States must create them and continue to fund them. Externally, significant accountability gaps exist. Indeed, many poor people affected by the policies of the IMF, World Bank, and WTO lack any ability to hold the organizations accountable. Nevertheless, there is a vaguely held notion that these people should have some say in what the organizations do--that the "voices of the poor," in the World Bank's words, should be heard. Many feel, then, that these organizations should be externally as well as internally accountable.

Various NGOs purporting to speak for and promote principles that help affected people gain legitimacy on the basis of this widespread belief. One result of their endeavors is that the decision-making processes of many multilateral organizations have become remarkably transparent. Indeed, in transparency they now compare well to the decision-making processes of most governments, even some democratic ones. When their processes are not transparent, the chief source of non-transparency is governmental pressure for confidentiality.

But the decentralization and discord characteristic of world politics mean that these organizations cannot keep secrets very well. Important negotiations, such as those about the Multilateral Agreement on Investment several years ago, are almost bound to leak. Leaders then spend much of their time answering charges that are made against their organizations, and seeking to persuade constituencies that the organizations are actually constructive, responsive, and legitimate.

These organizations are therefore anything but "out-of-control bureaucracies" accountable to no one. Indeed, the real problem appears quite different. A large number of would-be principals, led by a variety of NGOs, demand accountability. But the NGOs are weak compared with governments, to which these organizations are chiefly accountable. When they lose the battle due to their institutionally weak positions, NGOs condemn the organizations as "unaccountable."

What the controversies indicate is not that the intergovernmental organizations are unaccountable, but that accountability is a matter of distribution--who are the organizations accountable to? The organizations are accountable to the states that authorized their creation and provide financial support. The real issue is, are they accountable to the right groups? NGOs make a normative claim for accountability to groups that are affected or for accountability to principles such as "sustainable development" or "human rights." Thus external accountability claims based on the impact of these organizations compete with internal accountability claims, largely by national governments, based on authorization and support from their constituents. These are serious issues, but they are issues not of a "lack of accountability" as much as they are issues of "accountability to whom?" Different types of accountability favor different accountability holders. Once again, accountability is largely a matter of power.
Ironically, people demanding accountability mainly target inter-governmental organizations because those organizations are weak and visible. They are good targets because they do not have strong constituencies. Indeed, it seems that the external accountability gaps are actually greatest for entities that are not conventionally held accountable on a transnational basis. Five such sets of entities can be mentioned:

First, multinational corporations are held internally accountable, more or less with success, to their shareholders, who authorize action and provide support. But their actions also have enormous effects on other people. The "anti-globalization movement" is right to be concerned about corporate power, even if its proposed remedies seem incoherent. If they are concerned about the effects of powerful entities on powerless people, scholars should ask how to hold corporations accountable, as national governments in capitalist societies have sought to do for more than a century. The effects are particularly pronounced for media conglomerates, but scholars have not focused on them. And globalization means it is more difficult for national governments to hold corporations accountable than in the past.

A second example is the Roman Catholic Church. The Church is a secretive, authoritarian structure that is not particularly accountable to any human institutions or groups, as its reaction to the pedophilia scandal in the US Church indicates.

Additionally, mass religious movements without hierarchical organizations constitute another set. Fundamentalist Islamic movements fall into this category--and unlike the Roman Catholic Church, they have no hierarchical organization to hold accountable.

Covert terrorist networks, such as Al Qaeda, are almost by definition not externally accountable. They do not accept the responsibility of identifying themselves, much less responding to questions or accepting others' right to sanction them. They can be punished, but they cannot be "held accountable."

Last, powerful states are yet another example of entities that have little accountability. The doctrine of sovereignty has traditionally protected states from external accountability although it has not necessarily protected weak states from accountability to the strong states, as Stanford Professor of International Relations Stephen Krasner has noted. Multilateral institutions are designed to make states accountable to each other, if not to outsiders. Even moderately powerful states, however, can resist external accountability on many issues.

It has been notably difficult for the United Nations to hold Israel accountable for its actions in the West Bank. Additionally, Egypt and Saudi Arabia have not been held accountable to the victims of the terrorists whose supporters they have often encouraged. Extremely powerful states seem virtually immune from accountability if they refuse to accept it. The United States is, of course, the chief case in point. All doubters have to do is look at the abuses committed in Abu Ghraib prison.
and the conditions of the US prison in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and reconcile it with the fact that no high-level US officials have been held accountable for the policies that enabled or even facilitated these violations of presidential pledges and international law.

Accountability of States

States are powerful and often not externally accountable, but institutions of multilateralism do hold them accountable on some issues. If we care about accountability, we should inquire as to how such institutions could be extended and made more effective. We should begin by recognizing, as political philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau did, that internal democracy will not assure accountability to outsiders whom the powerful democracy affects.

The United States, Israel, and other democracies are internally accountable to their populaces, but are not externally accountable to any institution. Held has astutely pointed out that the external accountability problem may even be greater as a result of democracy: "arrogance has been reinforced by the claim of the political elites to derive their support from that most virtuous source of power--the demos."

Yet three mechanisms of accountability do apply to states. First, weak countries that economically depend on the decisions of richer countries are subject to demands for fiscal accountability. Professor Albert Hirschman pointed out more than 50 years ago that foreign trade, when it produces benefits, generates an "influence effect." Here as elsewhere, accountability is a power-laden concept, for power comes from asymmetrical interdependence in favor of the power wielder.

The implication of the influence effect is that rich countries seeking to hold poor countries accountable are likely to become more "generous." Dramatically increased efforts to increase the benefits that poor countries receive from globalization would create an influence effect, making it easier to hold these countries accountable for their actions. Of course, for the poor countries such generosity would be problematic, precisely because it would make them more dependent on the rich.

Second, there are pockets of institutionalized accountability in world politics. States that are members of regional organizations such as the European Union are subject to demands for accountability from their peers. Further, states that have joined organizations such as the WTO or the new International Criminal Court are subject to legal accountability. Europe, the United States, Japan, and other rich countries are targets of demands for accountability in trade, exemplified by debate over their agricultural subsidies and protection of old industries such as steel. The extension of some degree of accountability to powerful states, through multilateral institutions or other forms of governance, offers a glimmer of hope. It should be remembered, however, that these powerful states accept accountability not for its own sake but mainly because they gain benefits themselves from these institutions.
Finally, the most general form of accountability in world politics is reputational. It is the only form of external accountability that appears to constrain the United States' political-military activities. Reputation is double-edged, because states may seek reputations for being tough bullies as well as for being reliable partners. The lack of institutionalization of reputational concerns makes reputation a relatively unreliable source of constraint. Yet reputational accountability has some significance because reputations of states matter for other activities. To be effective, states have to be included in the relevant networks. Hence, reputational accountability, albeit weak, is significant.

On any given issue, the United States can typically act unilaterally, dismissing any external agent's demands for accountability. However, the United States has many objectives in the world, some of which require others' voluntary cooperation to be successful. It would be impossible for the United States to coerce other states on all issues of concern. Failures of cooperation lead to retaliation, following practices of reciprocity. More diffusely, damage to the reputation of the United States as a potential cooperator reduces the incentives for others to cooperate with the United States in anticipation of cooperation on some other issues in the future.

Most generally, any country playing a long-term leadership role in global governance has a long-term interest in the legitimacy of global governance, as well as in its status as leader. To any sensible US administration, such concern for leadership would be a constraint--and, as Harvard Professor Joseph Nye writes, a reason to let itself be held accountable, to some extent, on other issues.

All three sources of accountability mentioned thus far--the need of poor countries for aid, institutionalization in international organizations, and reputational concerns arising from multiple issues for powerful states such as the United States--are augmented by globalization. Globalization may weaken internal accountability within democracies, but it is a condition for external accountability.

Here is another irony. Opponents of globalization often raise the issue of accountability as an argument against globalization. But they are thinking of a largely imaginary bygone world in which states actually controlled their borders and democratic governments regulated domestic activities through democratic means. Their imaginary world envisions the United States during the New Deal, as they would have liked it to evolve--without Nazism, fascism, communism, and World War II. In fact, the choice is not between globalization and none, but rather between relatively legitimate globalization with a measure of democratic and pluralistic accountability over powerful entities and illegitimate globalization without such accountability.

All that said, it would nevertheless be naive to believe that the United States will be easy to hold externally accountable to any institution. For the United States to be held accountable, internal accountability will have to supplement external accountability. Its own people who are sensitive to world politics will have to demand it, both on the grounds of self-interest and with respect to US values. In view of contemporary US public attitudes, this hortatory comment does not necessarily offer much hope, at least in the short run. Indeed, my ironic conclusion is that two sworn
enemies--Al Qaeda and the United States--have in common their lack of accountability relative to other actors in world politics.

The Way Forward

For the building of a more accountable global future, four observations are in order. First, external accountability tends to vary inversely with the power of the entities being held accountable. Inter-governmental organizations and weak, dependent states are most easily held accountable. We cannot expect to hold shadowy terrorist movements accountable. But we should pay more attention to the accountability of corporations, religious organizations and movements, as well as powerful states.

Second, to hold powerful states accountable, the world needs more mechanisms for multilateral governance. More interdependence on more issues would also help, by reinforcing reputational incentives and credibility to accept accountability. Both institutionalization and reputational accountability depend on globalization. US citizens should display "a decent respect for the opinions of mankind," but as long as the United States remains as powerful as it is now, they are unlikely to do so consistently between the many issues that may arise.

Third, the United States especially needs to be held accountable, because its internal democracy cannot be counted on to defend the interests of weak peoples whom US actions may harm. Still, it is very difficult to hold the United States accountable, since one dimension of power is that it protects the power holder from accountability. The events of September 11, 2001, led to more concentration of power and more state action on the part of the United States. As a result, the world is now further from the ideal of transnational accountability.

Fourth, if we recognize that powerful states pose the most serious threats to accountability in world politics, we will see that well-meaning efforts to demand "more accountability" from international organizations can be problematic. "More accountable" often means "accountable to NGOs and advocacy networks," rather than just to governments. Certainly some real benefits could result from making the WTO and the IMF more accountable to a wider range of interests and values.

However, we should be alert to the prospect that the political result of such a shift would be a reduction of states' interests in such organizations. If states get less benefit from international institutions, they will be less willing to provide resources and to accept demands on them, through these institutions, for accountability. The ultimate result of such well-meaning moves, therefore, could be a weakening of the accountability, limited as it is, that multilateralism imposes on powerful states. Those who believe in accountability as a way of limiting abuses of power should work to build support within powerful, rich countries for acceptance of more effective and legitimate multilateral governance to achieve human purposes, and for the increased external accountability that is likely to follow.

This article is drawn from Robert O. Keohane's chapter, "Global Governance and Democratic
GLOBAL ACCOUNTABILITY RATINGS

The Global Accountability Report evaluated accountability for international organizations. "Member Control" measures the role members play in the governance of the organization. "Access to Information" reflects the availability of annual reports and information about activities and governance.

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Global Accountability Report 2003, One World Trust

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