

UNESCO – TIME TO LEAVE

In December 1983, the United States served notice on the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) that it intended to leave that organization at the end of 1984. The time to implement that decision has now come.

The reasons given for the decision, when it was announced, were that UNESCO is excessively politicized, that it consistently favors "statist" solutions to problems (i.e., solutions involving putting greater power in the hands of governments), and that it is very badly managed. Hardly any knowledgeable observer contests the validity of these charges. The details of mismanagement have been spelled out at length, and with compelling evidence, in the recently released General Accounting Office review of UNESCO.

Despite its radical nature, the decision to withdraw from UNESCO received widespread bipartisan support. The New York Times, The Washington Post, and The Wall Street Journal approved. So did Walter Mondale.

In making the decision known, the U.S. government indicated that it would reconsider its withdrawal if serious improvements were evident in UNESCO's performance before the end of 1984. With this in mind a monitoring panel of interested citizens was set up by the government to review UNESCO activities during the year. The panel has recently concluded its work and has decided unanimously that significant reform did not take place during the year.

There are last minute efforts by the critics of the decision (who are mainly centered in the U.S. National Commission for UNESCO) to reverse it or at least to delay its implementation for a further year. These should be firmly resisted and the U.S. should withdraw from UNESCO, as planned, on December 31, 1984. It should do so for three reasons:

1. What is at issue is important. It is important to make it clear that the U.S. is not prepared to tolerate, and pay for, sustained and unfair attacks on its fundamental values and institutions. It is important also to establish that the U.S. is not prepared to tolerate the wasting of the millions of dollars it gives to help the world's poor and illiterate.

2. America can exert more effective pressure for the reform of UNESCO from outside than it can from within. When it withdrew from the International Labor Organization (ILO) in 1977-1979, the result was a marked improvement in that body's performance which made it possible for the U.S. to resume membership in 1980. In the case of UNESCO, the U.S. decision to withdraw has already stimulated a more serious concern with reform than has ever existed before. Great Britain has followed the American lead and announced that it too will serve notice at the end of this year. According to observers, from Jeane Kirkpatrick down, the decision has also had a salutary effect in the rest of the U.N. system. Demonstrating seriousness, by actually putting the decision into effect, is essential to maintain the pressure. On the other hand, "working from within" has failed and will continue to fail: it involves negotiating with those who have created the present mess and who benefit from it; and it involves doing so in circumstances in which they control the negotiating process.

3. Even apart from the merits of the case, the fact that the U.S. has taken the decision to withdraw, after due deliberation, in itself is a compelling reason for not retreating from it or delaying its implementation. A great country which values its reputation should carry out what it has solemnly announced it will do. To do otherwise is to invite derision and contempt, not only in UNESCO but generally.

A U.S. withdrawal does not mean that the causes of educational, scientific, and cultural cooperation must suffer. Aid for those causes can, and should, be given bilaterally. Alternate mechanisms for cooperation either already exist, or can be created, and these should be used until such time as UNESCO is capable of fulfilling its mandate.

Nor, as is sometimes alleged, will leaving mean that UNESCO will be "pushed in the hands of the Soviets." In the case of the ILO exactly the opposite occurred when America withdrew, and that organization became tougher in its dealings with Communist countries. Besides, Third World countries know that the Soviet record as a giver of aid is abysmal and they would strive to avoid being dependent on it.

The case for proceeding with the decision to withdraw from UNESCO is overwhelming. The U.S. government should move quickly to put the matter beyond any doubt and speculation.

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