

UPDATE

HELP WANTED: A NEW SECRETARY GENERAL FOR THE UNITED NATIONS

(Updating *Backgrounder Update* No. 97, "United Nations Reform: Progress Report," April 17, 1989; *Backgrounder* No. 678, "At the United Nations, Reform Has A Long Way to Go," October 24, 1988.)

Javier Perez de Cuellar's second term as Secretary General of the United Nations ends on December 31, 1991. Any prospects for a third term are dimmed by persistent reports that his health is poor and that he has tired of his very demanding job. As a result, a global search for a suitable successor soon will be under way. This is very important because a Secretary General greatly influences the U.N. system through his capacity to select personnel, make management changes, and use his international "bully pulpit." This time the choice of a new Secretary General is particularly important because he (or she) could become a powerful force for – or obstacle to – the change that the U.N. sorely needs. For Washington, therefore, which will have a major voice in the selection process, the foremost concerns should be that Perez de Cuellar's successor be committed to aggressive organizational reform of the U.N. and to eradicating the U.N.'s hostility to market-based economic and legal arrangements that protect individual economic liberty, and as such are essential for economic growth. The time has come to take the dead hand of statist socialism off the rudder of the U.N.

Building on Success. The selection of a new Secretary General is critical because Perez de Cuellar's successor will assume office at a time when an easing of superpower tensions could reinvigorate the U.N., which is flushed with success from the reversal of Iraqi aggression in Kuwait. The U.N.'s international prominence is the highest it has been in years. Significantly, however, its effectiveness is limited severely by the failure of the persistent efforts to reform U.N. processes and structures mounted by the United States and other nations during the past decade. If these shortcomings in the areas of management and personnel are not corrected soon, the opportunity for the U.N. to become a more effective international organization will be squandered.

When it came to reform Perez de Cuellar was unable or unwilling to push it. His strengths lay in diplomacy, not management. In the near decade since he became Secretary General on December 15, 1981, replacing the discredited Kurt Waldheim of Austria, who is widely believed to have been a Nazi activist during World War II, Perez de Cuellar led the U.N. to some key accomplishments. The U.N. helped to broker a successful ceasefire of the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War; after years of effort Namibia gained independence from South Africa in March 1990 under the auspices of an enormous U.N. elections supervision effort; and, of course, the U.N. played a prominent role in reversing the August 2, 1990, subjugation of Kuwait by Iraq.

Need for Change. Now it is time for reform and a reformer. Among those areas in greatest need of change are the personnel and management policies within the U.N. Secretariat in New York City. The top-heavy organizational structure of the U.N., for example, needs to be made more rational. It defies logic why the U.N. needs 25 second-echelon positions when it has only 18 third-echelon positions. Another problem is the lack of a Vice or Deputy Secretary General to take over for the Secretary General in the event of travel away from New York, illness, or death. Very important too are the reflexive policies that U.N. agencies pursue. It is time for the U.N. to learn the lessons of the failure of state planning in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. In place of its continued championship of state economic planning and centralization, the U.N. and its agencies should favor development policies that stress the importance of free market economic reforms and the necessity of political decentralization.

The changes in Moscow's foreign policy that greatly reduced Cold War tensions make possible U.S. and Soviet cooperation over the selection of the next Secretary General. This cooperation could produce better candidates than in the past.

The Secretary General is chosen in two steps. First, the U.N. Security Council nominates a candidate to the General Assembly. This requires the backing of nine of the Security Council's fifteen members, including that of all five permanent members — America, Britain, China, France, and the U.S.S.R. Second, the General Assembly must approve the candidate by a majority of members present and voting. Although the General Assembly technically has the power to defeat a nominee, it has never done so. In practice, therefore, the power to select a new Secretary General rests with the Security Council. During the Cold War the U.S. and the Soviet Union were so distrustful of each other that any candidate attractive to one surely would be vetoed by the other. This stand-off favored bland candidates who would not become a diplomatic problem for the permanent members.

The U.S.-Soviet relationship, of course, remains tempered by differences. But no longer can it be assumed that one automatically will veto a candidate simply because he is supported by the other.

Superpower Consensus. There may be, in fact, a growing American-Soviet consensus on what is needed to reform the U.N. In private conversations at the Soviet mission to the U.N., high-level Soviet officials have told The Heritage Foundation that they are enthusiastic about organizational reform. The Soviets have praised the U.S.-backed "unitary U.N." concept that aims at trimming the U.N. bureaucracy and streamlining its operations. The term "unitary" stresses the fact that an efficient U.N. must co-ordinate activities between its various branches and reduce duplication of effort. John Bolton, the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for International Organization Affairs who devised the "unitary U.N." concept, told a Washington Federalist Society luncheon on March 22 that there is virtually no difference between the Soviet Union and the U.S. on U.N. budget issues. Thus, cooperation between the two countries over the selection of Perez de Cuellar's replacement clearly is conceivable. A dynamic reformer acceptable to both Moscow and Washington could be in the Secretary General's office as 1992 begins.

The new Secretary General should be committed to the following goals:

GOAL #1: Reforming itself as the U.N.'s top priority. This will not be easy because decades of terrible management practices have a stranglehold on the organization. Hiring too often is based on political criteria and patronage. Low output and lower quality typify U.N. work standards. Attempts to attack and change these problems will be resisted vigorously by the U.N. bureaucracy. The new Secretary General must have the burning desire to reform if he expects to change bureaucratic habits.

GOAL #2: Revamping the institutional structure of the U.N. America's Bolton, explaining his idea of a "unitary U.N.," writes: "...almost all components of the UN system have expanded their programs beyond the originally intended missions and are now duplicating each other's work." To remedy this, therefore, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), for instance, should concentrate more on collecting and disseminating technical information on food and agriculture policy rather than on the development questions dealt with by other U.N. agencies. Bolton also calls for budget "transparency," by which the various U.N. budgets are to be prepared in a way comprehensible to those trained to read financial reports. The current budgeting method can be so opaque that it is impossible to enforce the financial accountability of some agencies. The Soviets have expressed strong public and private support for such reforms, primarily because of their interest in cutting U.N. costs and thus their own financial burden in paying for U.N. operations.

GOAL #3: Adapting the U.N. to changes in the global power structure. The re-emergence of Germany and Japan as powerful nations has altered the global distribution of power that existed in 1945 at the U.N.'s founding. The challenge for the new Secretary General will be to reconfigure the Security Council to accommodate these re-emergent powers without expanding the number of permanent members with veto power. The best solution would be to give Germany and Japan perpetual seats on the Security Council but not include them in the group of five members whose approval is necessary for the passage of any Security Council resolution.

GOAL #4: Turning the U.N. into an engine of economic reform. The U.N. should become an advocate of economic growth, entrepreneurial liberty, and the protection of private property from the state. Directing the U.N. away from the statist, anti-market policies that it long has promoted will not be easy. U.N. bureaucrats have been taught that economies must be "managed," that foreign investment induces dependence, and that only state intervention can correct the failings of the free market economic system. It will take time to replace those staffers. Yet the new Secretary General must be committed to do so.



After decades of lethargy the U.N. has the chance to become an efficient, focused international organization that can assist nations in avoiding war and in promoting economic growth. The essential first step toward this is the appointment of a new Secretary General. He – or she – as the U.N.'s top official must be committed to four goals: 1) reforming the management practices of the organization itself; 2) revamping the institutional structures of the U.N.; 3) altering the Security Council to reflect the new international power arrangements; and 4) making the U.N. an exponent of economic growth and entrepreneurial freedom. These are the job qualifications that Washington, perhaps even in cooperation with Moscow, should seek in the next U.N. Secretary General.

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