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LOOK BEFORE LEAPING TO REJOIN UNESCO

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On May 2, the House International Relations Committee approved an amendment to the State Department reauthorization bill that requires President Bush to take "all necessary steps" to renew U.S. membership in the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). In a remarkable show of indifference on an issue that previously raised serious U.S. concerns, 12 committee members (10 Republicans and two Democrats) did not vote, enabling the measure to pass by a vote of 23 to 14. Renewing membership in UNESCO should be considered only after the organization has reformed. There are promising signs that UNESCO may reform, but until reforms can be verified, Congress should not consider the committee's call to rejoin.

UNESCO's Opposition to Reform. The United States withdrew from UNESCO in 1984 to protest the organization's growing politicization and anti-Western bias, rampant budgetary mismanagement, and advocacy of policies that undermine freedom of the press and free markets. A particularly divisive issue was UNESCO's advocacy of a "new world information order" (NWIO) to counter an alleged pro-Western bias in global news agencies; specifically, the organization sought the licensing of journalists, the creation of an international code of press ethics, and increasing government control over the media.

After more than 16 years without U.S. membership, UNESCO finally appears willing to pay more than lip service to the issue of reform. It has abandoned many of its more controversial policies, including the NWIO, and proponents cite this as a

principal reason the United States should rejoin the organization. UNESCO's new Director-General, Koichiro Matsuura of Japan, has promised to address the many remaining problems, admitting that UNESCO's mission and programs are too broad and that many duplicate those of other international organizations. Matsuura also has cut some top-level posts and initiated greater budget oversight.

Nevertheless, reform is "not moving far enough fast enough," in the words of one unidentified Western diplomat quoted in a November 2000 issue of *The Christian Science Monitor*. In the end, the desires of the Director-General may be irrelevant. As a UNESCO staffer remarked to *The Guardian* (London) in 1999, no "one person can change UNESCO.... They should just cut everyone's salary to \$30,000 a year, and see who was left. Those would be the people worth having."

Matsuura faces stiff opposition from developing countries and from his staff. Developing countries are concerned that reforms will scale back expenditures on projects they favor and close field offices that spend four times as much on overhead as on projects. The UNESCO staff staged a hunger strike

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in January 2000 to protest Matsuura's suspension of appointments and promotions of unqualified individuals or those who failed to meet the organization's standards for fair competition. David Malone, President of the International Peace Academy in New York and a former Canadian Foreign Ministry official in charge of relations with international agencies, sums up the problem: "Matsuura faces an uphill battle in turning around an organization which is deeply scarred.... [S]uccessive heads have turned it into a personal patronage machine, neglecting programs and bloating the staffing."

History demonstrates that UNESCO is difficult to reform. Previous calls for the United States to rejoin after a few reforms were implemented under a new Director-General in 1987 were premature, as mismanagement continued to plague the agency. That Matsuura is still fighting to reform UNESCO nearly two decades after America originally issued its demands for reform merely illustrates the severity of the problem.

Look Before Leaping. The United States should not rush to restore its membership in UNESCO; instead, it should proceed cautiously and consider membership on its merits rather than as a reward for reform. The question of whether UNESCO membership harms or benefits Americans and the nation must be asked and then answered clearly and convincingly. As Malone notes, "We used to all know what the UNESCO objectives were. Now nobody knows what UNESCO does beyond the World Heritage sites. The important work is on literacy, education, key cultural monuments and themes, and serving as a forum for the promotion of high scientific standards. Who ever consults UNESCO now on science?"

The few UNESCO programs that have coherent and admirable objectives, even when their merits and necessity are questionable, can be supported without U.S. membership. The World Heritage program is one example. Indeed, despite lacking membership, the United States provided \$2.25 million in support of UNESCO's programs in FY 2000 alone, according to the State Department.

America is able to support specific programs it likes without supporting those that are inimical to its interests or simply wasteful.

What does the United States sacrifice by not being a member of UNESCO? Very little. Even though the U.S. voice in UNESCO is slight, few UNESCO declarations are given credence internationally without U.S. support or concurrence. America has no say in the agency's budgetary decisions, but even when the U.S. was a member, it enjoyed only marginal influence because it held merely one of over 150 votes. The lack of influence was one reason the United States chose to withdraw. UNESCO had passed a budget over U.S. objections even though the United States paid 25 percent of the budget, and America's demand that large financial contributors be given more weight in budgetary matters was rebuffed and remains unresolved. Moreover, UNESCO has had little real impact on its priority issues: education, dissemination of scientific knowledge, and the free flow of information. The World Bank and individual nations spend more to promote education in poor countries, and the Internet facilitates the spread of knowledge and information.

Conclusion. UNESCO is much closer to U.S. positions after 16 years of American non-membership than it was in 1984. Although its goals have some merit, the organization simply does not offer enough benefit to the United States to justify the expense of membership. Washington should consider rejoining only after UNESCO has implemented the reforms long demanded by the United States and after those reforms have been verified through independent audits. Foreign policy should be guided by national interests. Until UNESCO can prove that it has reformed, rejoining the organization does not meet this core principle.

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