

Filling UNESCO's place

The withdrawal of the United States from UNESCO at the end of 1984 left many scientists and educators with mixed feelings. Certainly UNESCO was flawed.

Reports from observers—even ones friendly to UNESCO—indicated that serious problems had arisen within that organization. Staffing practices had become questionable, political considerations weighed heavily in program decisions, about 80% of UNESCO funding went for the support of its Paris headquarters, and a chilling attitude was displayed toward the press.

On the other hand, many scientists believed strongly that an international organization such as UNESCO is needed to stimulate and coordinate global scientific, educational and cultural activities. The less-developed countries, seeking to participate more fully in scientific and educational advancement, have seen UNESCO as a unique conduit to each other and to the developed world. To the developed countries, UNESCO has been a useful, and in some cases invaluable, organization for facilitating multinational projects. UNESCO's record over several decades shows that it has often met these expectations well. Its support has made possible a long list of international conferences, projects, and publications that have enabled many who could not otherwise have participated to know about and have access to research and education activities (PHYSICS TODAY, February, page 53). UNESCO's intergovernmental status and coordination of projects—for example, global studies in oceanography and climatology—have made it possible to conduct research that would be impossible without the cooperation of a large number of governments.

Deciding whether the US should tolerate UNESCO's deficiencies, while working for reform, or should withdraw was a judgment call—and a difficult one. Scientific organizations have had to make up their minds about this during the last year. The Executive Board of the American Association of Physics Teachers did so and concluded that the pluses in UNESCO's performance outweighed the minuses. In a letter to Secretary of State Shultz, Joe P. Meyer, 1984 president of the Association, urged that the US remain a member state of UNESCO, but work energetically and vigilantly from within to overcome UNESCO shortcomings. Other organizations—although not all—reached similar conclusions. The US government, however, having decided that it had reached the end of the road in efforts to persuade UNESCO by less drastic measures to reform, carried out its intention to withdraw as of 31 December 1984 (PHYSICS TODAY, February, page 53). It announced concurrently that it would offset any negative effects of its withdrawal on US cooperation in international science and education by instituting compensatory measures and that it would maintain observer status within UNESCO.

Where does this drastic action leave scientists and educators in this country? Withdrawal from the US financial commitment to UNESCO releases about \$47 million annually in US funds; out of that annual sum, \$14 million had been going to scientific organizations and studies. Scientists and their organizations should

urge that these funds not be lost to international cooperation in science, education and culture. We were encouraged by a letter from Assistant Secretary of State Gregory Newell, sent shortly before the US withdrawal, which contains the statement:

A US withdrawal from UNESCO would not presage any abandonment of international cooperation in education, science, culture, and communication. In various alternative ways we would continue to pursue the goals our nation originally sought to achieve through UNESCO.

A meeting with Ambassador Roger Kirk, Senior Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, has revealed that the Administration has decided to request only \$2.75 million for international scientific projects that had previously been funded by UNESCO (PHYSICS TODAY, April, page 60). Congressional action, however, could restore the funding to the previous level.

It seems to us that two kinds of activities will be important:

► Support once provided by UNESCO needs to be channeled more directly by the US to such international science organizations as the International Council of Scientific Unions and its member unions, such as the International Union of Pure and Applied Physics. The AAPT believes that subcommissions in education, such as the IUPAP Commission on Physics Education, which have almost no non-UNESCO funds to carry out their missions, should be given special attention.

► A reassessment of UNESCO itself should be launched soon and pursued vigorously. UNESCO management should be left in no doubt as to where its strengths and weaknesses are seen to lie and what will be acceptable to the US as a precondition for its return. Specifics are needed, and while the official panel of observers and the State Department will have the primary responsibility for providing them, scientists can draw on their own experiences with UNESCO to suggest improvements in the ways that UNESCO organizes and conducts its affairs. The member societies of the American Institute of Physics should not be backward in making their views known.

With the actual withdrawal of the US, the announced withdrawal of Britain and Singapore, and the possible withdrawal of Belgium, Japan and West Germany, UNESCO's survival is questionable. Yet this faltering international servant, brought so hopefully into being almost three decades ago, deserves some consideration for its good performance in the past. Can hardheaded and realistic appraisal and determined reform return UNESCO to the high international standing it once enjoyed? If so, well and good. But if UNESCO disappears, then what?

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