

After Republican Takeover of Congress, White House Backs Off Rejoining UNESCO

During its first two years the Clinton Administration had consistently promised to rejoin UNESCO and considered the best time to do this would be 1995, to mark the organization's 50th anniversary. The US, one of the principal architects of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, pulled out of the agency in 1984, claiming it literally seethed with waste, mismanagement, cronyism and anti-Western bias. Britain and Singapore withdrew a few months later, citing similar concerns. The US decision to rejoin UNESCO appeared imminent last September when the State Department and the White House Office of Management and Budget agreed to put into the fiscal 1996 budget request almost \$20 million toward the US's annual contribution to the organization of \$65 million.

But after the Republicans won control of both houses of Congress last November, placing outspoken critics of the UN and foreign aid programs in powerful committee chairmanships, the UNESCO allocation was quietly dropped the following month at a White House budget review. "The decision was not an indictment of UNESCO today," says Douglas J. Bennet, assistant secretary of State for international organization affairs. "And I hope it's not a permanent decision. It just reflects an unfinished struggle over our major priorities as we grapple with the department's budget limits."

A 'wait-and-see' approach

Bennet agrees with the fairly favorable reviews of UNESCO's management, economic and personnel reforms that were put in place since 1987, after the election of Federico Mayor Zaragoza, an amiable and urbane Spanish professor of biochemistry, as the organization's director general. Progress in instituting the reforms was agonizingly slow, however, causing the State Department to report in 1990 that UNESCO was still partisan and ineffective. The official US position at the time was to take a "wait-and-see" attitude on rejoining (see PHYSICS TODAY, June 1990, page 61). Since then Mayor has corrected many of the worst excesses that characterized UNESCO in the 13-year reign of his predecessor, Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow, a former education minister in Senegal.

After consulting with more than 50 nongovernmental groups that had

expressed support for US reentry into UNESCO, the State Department carried out an interagency review of the organization in 1993 and concluded that it was in the interest of the country in the post-cold war era to rejoin, possibly in fiscal 1996. In Britain, the Foreign Affairs Committee of the House of Commons reported last year that the debate over UNESCO policy, budgetary and management problems "has been settled in the organization's favour" and urged rejoining.

But the Clinton Administration's change of mind means a further delay. White House sources say that reversing the earlier decision was done largely to hold down the budget. Critics of the White House about-face argue that \$20 million in a budget of \$1.61 trillion is a trivial sum and that the inaction on UNESCO was an overreaction to some of Congress's new leaders who have bashed the UN and its affiliates in the past.

The policy change provoked three former government officials to warn President Clinton against knuckling under to isolationist political forces in the US. If the Administration "cannot bring itself to summon the US back into UNESCO, it is almost impossible to see how a US reentry can be effected in the foreseeable future," wrote Elliot Richardson, a Cabinet member in the Nixon presidency, Cyrus R. Vance, Secretary of State in the Carter years, and John C. Whitehead, Deputy Secretary of State in the Reagan Administration and now chairman of the United Nations Association of the United States.

In their letter to Clinton on 19 December, the three men stated: "A US withdrawal that began as tactical 'shock therapy' for UN reform would become a permanent legacy of surly, know-nothing zealotry." They emphasized that "No other organization has a mandate, reaching into virtually every country around the world, for literacy and schools development; for scientific exchanges, especially in applied environmental science; for safeguarding cultural heritage; and for the free flow of information. . . . Rarely has a President had an opportunity, at a single stroke, to strengthen the bonds of the international community, delight his intellectually vibrant domestic constituencies, advance the cause of UN reform, fulfill international pledges for education and human rights, and underpin international peace and security. We

hope you will seize it."

The United Nations Association received a letter dated 20 December from Strobe Talbott, Deputy Secretary of State. In it, Talbott stated that returning to UNESCO "remains high on our agenda," but that "given compelling high-priority demands for limited funds, this is not an easy task and the outlook is not good." Nonetheless, the Administration had announced back in October that the Agency for International Development would give more than \$300 000 to UNESCO to help rebuild the educational system in Haiti.

A common cause with UNESCO

For its part, the American Physical Society is working with UNESCO through a Physics Action Council to promote "the widest possible participation of the world's physicists in the international physics enterprise" by advising the organization on activities to undertake (see PHYSICS TODAY, June 1994, page 68). This common cause with the organization was mentioned in a letter to Clinton on 17 January from APS President C. Kumar N. Patel, who is vice chancellor for research at UCLA. "The American physics community is playing a leadership role in organizing UNESCO as an effective tool to revitalize international collaboration and to address such issues as widening access to large facilities, developing computer-mediated network telecommunications and invigorating university education," wrote Patel. "And while we have been able to push UNESCO along this path despite the fact that the US is not now a member state, the wider international physics community supported our initiative. As a result, our work has been funded with UN and other international resources."

The White House decision to defer the US return to UNESCO, Patel indicated, "will have serious consequences for the health and vigor of American science." He then noted a major consequence: "We are now in danger of having to step back at a time of fiscal retrenchment when international collaboration is becoming essential to US interests."

On 6 February the President replied that budget demands "do not allow the flexibility to make the substantial outlays required for membership in UNESCO."

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