

U.N. WATCH

The Minds of Men

After bitter debates and threats about expenditures and activities, the United States has formally notified UNESCO's director general that it will withdraw from the agency at the end of 1984. Procedural rules require a year's notice of such intention. At the same time, U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz wrote to U.N. Secretary General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar with assurances that the withdrawal "does not presage any wider disengagement from the United Nations."

There has always been confusion about what the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization is supposed to do. Its preamble reads: "The Governments of the States parties to this constitution on behalf of their people declare, *since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed...*" (emphasis added). Given a mandate to work on "the minds of men," clarity of purpose is hardly to be expected. At the outset the Soviet Union and the Eastern-bloc countries refused to join. In those early years the U.N. and its agencies were dominated by Western interests; and Russia, with massive recovery problems, considered the contribution of funds to promote education and culture on the international level frivolous indeed.

The agency's first programs were educational and seemingly noncontroversial, focused as they were on the elimination of illiteracy, distribution of international book coupons to students, arrangements for scientific and cultural exchanges, and the gathering of data on a multitude of activities. Even then critics accused UNESCO of trying to do too much and achieving little.

In the late 1950s the USSR reconsidered its position, joined the agency, and brought with it all the Eastern European states. In the '60s, as new Asian and African nations joined, the U.N., like Topsy, just grew. The Arab states and Third World countries, led by the USSR, now consistently outvoted the U.S. and its supporters on every crucial issue. Even successful pilot projects—a controlled education program in Haiti, a "dry zone" project in Sri Lanka (then Ceylon), a fundamental education center in Mexico, teacher training in Egypt—were debated to death when expansion was recommended. In U.N. parlance, UNESCO was becoming "politicized."

Increasingly, meetings became exercises in name-calling. The U.S. was castigated as imperialist, South Africa was denounced as racist, theories of a free market economy were ridiculed, and Israel's legitimacy was questioned (Israel was removed from membership in UNESCO's European group in 1974). Recently, the agency has inserted itself into disarmament and human rights. Among the groups that helped to write the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—one of history's most idealistic documents—the agency is now trying to supplant *that* concept with a concept of "collective rights." Here, individual rights will be subordinate to such immediate goals as development, job security, and increased GNP—all ultimately determined by state authority, of course.

The immediate cause of the U.S. break with UNESCO is the agency's role in promoting a "new world information

order." The governments of poor and developing countries have long protested the Western media's reporting of the corruption, inefficiency, and rights violations that mark their regimes without taking account of the poverty, lack of training, and the destructive legacy of colonialism to which they are heir. A number of U.N. reports have supported this view from the Third World.

UNESCO's answer is a parallel international information system paid for by UNESCO but controlled by governments. Long buried by rhetoric, the aim of this "new order" was made abundantly clear recently by a Russian delegate. Governments, he said, have the right to control what is said about them. To achieve this aim, UNESCO has proposed a system for licensing journalists ("for their own protection") and restrictions on Western reporting. As the plan moved ahead on paper, representatives of the Western press grew more and more apprehensive. Meeting in Talloires, France, in 1981, they issued a statement that went to the heart of the matter. Governments, they declared, exist to protect the rights of the individual; a press free of government control is one of those rights.

Only a handful of UNESCO members agree. Not one country in Africa or the Arab world maintains a free press in the Western sense; none is unaware, however, of the role the press can play in calling governments to account. In a military coup, the insurgents' first step is the seizure of radio and press—as illustrated recently in two countries as diverse as Nigeria and Suriname.

Reluctant to provide funds for the "new information order" and critical as well of the growing UNESCO bureaucracy, the U.S. fought a losing battle to cut the agency's proposed budget of \$374.4 million. It cast the lone dissenting vote. So murky are UNESCO's finances, in fact, that no one in the agency could determine whether the sum voted on represented an increase of 3, 6, or 10 per cent over the previous year. The U.S. contributes about \$50 million annually.

The withdrawal action is not unprecedented for the United States. In 1977, U.S. representatives to the International Labor Organization (ILO), frustrated by the constant and irrational criticism of American labor policies while Soviet and Third World violations were ignored, recommended that the U.S. resign from the agency. Because the U.S. contribution was vital to the financial health of the ILO, which conducts solid research aimed at improving labor conditions throughout the world, ILO members saw the light. They practiced restraint for a couple of years and the United States rejoined.

At issue in the UNESCO situation are matters far more ideological and, consequently, more intractable. The U.S. Commission for UNESCO, an advisory group, voted against withdrawal, but Jean Girard, the U.S. representative at Paris headquarters and a constant auditor at UNESCO meetings, suggested resignation. The State Department and President Reagan agreed.

Will UNESCO retract its "new world information order" and reform its fiscal ways? Not likely.

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