

UNESCO Pullout: Intent Is Reform

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Newsday UN Bureau

United Nations — Rep. James Scheuer has said the Reagan administration's decision to leave the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization — announced last December and formalized yesterday — was a way of "throwing a pound of raw meat to the radical right."

But the liberal Democrat from New York City — based on his own investigation in the past year and a highly critical report on UNESCO issued by the General Accounting Office last month — says the decision was correct anyway. UNESCO officials, too, say

that the initial impetus for the pullout was political, a bit of UN-bashing. But they say that what followed in the year after Washington gave its required notice of withdrawal was merely a structure set in motion to arrive at a foregone conclusion.

"The circumstances that impelled us last year to announce our plan to withdraw have not changed sufficiently this year to warrant a change in our decision," Gregory J. Newell, assistant secretary of state for international affairs, told a news conference in Washington yesterday.

Regardless of how it came to pass, the
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question that persists about the U.S. departure is whether it will have the impact that U.S. officials say was intended: forcing the Paris-based UN agency into major programmatic, budgetary and managerial reforms that might lure the United States back in.

On this, opinion is as divided as it was on the question of whether to pull out in the first place.

No one, not even the UNESCO staff, disputes the need for reform in the 161-nation, \$187.2-million-a-year operation. The United States has been contributing \$47 million a year to the budget.

And everyone concurs that the U.S. announcement a year ago of its intention to withdraw caused a "sea change" at UNESCO, a willingness to consider the need for reform seriously for the first time.

But the administration says what the UNESCO executive board agreed to at its meeting this fall did not go far enough in meeting U.S. demands to end politicization in UNESCO programs, hold to a zero-growth budget and reform the bureaucracy. The board did agree to a zero-growth budget, but with a proviso for an additional \$8 million the administration found objectionable.

"Certainly one of the most important things they didn't do was make any concrete recommendation on changing programs," said Lacy A. Wright Jr., director of the State Department's Office of Communication and UNESCO Affairs.

Scheuer agrees, but places the blame on UNESCO director-general Amadou-Mahtar M'bow. "He is the cause of the problem, and he could remedy it," Scheuer said. "He knows what the problems are . . . If he cares about his future, he will take the leadership in setting this vessel right again."

The administration has refrained from directly attacking M'bow, a Senegalese whom Third World nations regard as their spokesman.

Assistant Secretary Newell told the Senate Labor Committee Dec. 10 that depriving UNESCO of a quarter of its resources could force it to set priorities in its programs "in the way that we and others have urged."

Dutch Ambassador to UNESCO Maarten Mourik, however, said: "With no representative in the organization, it's difficult to see how you can push your ideas." He has coordinated the informal western group working for reform in UNESCO since the U.S. announcement of its intention a year ago.

Of all the western countries besides the United States that have expressed concern over UNESCO, Britain's voice has been loudest. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's government last month announced the British intention to leave UNESCO at the end of 1985.

"But the British shopping list is weak in comparison to what the United States wants," Mourik said. "The British are not asking for structural or institutional changes.

"If the U.S. would wish to negotiate by proxy, it would have to be through the British, and I don't see

Britain asking for more than what they want themselves. . . reforms will come to a standstill."

Former Australian Ambassador to UNESCO Owen Harries said: "Pressure is best kept up from the outside." He says he knows because he "tried doing it from the inside." For the past year, Harries has been in Washington at the conservative Heritage Foundation, key in the drive to get the United States out of UNESCO.

The United States pulled out of the International Labor Organization for similar reasons in 1977 and returned two years later. The State Department's Wright saw a parallel with UNESCO: "As in the case of the ILO, if we're out, there will be a lot of interest in getting us back in. It would play a role in what UNESCO did."

But Leonard Sussman, head of Freedom House and vice chairman of the U.S. National Commission for UNESCO, says the parallel is not exact. "The ILO produces little, if anything, that directly profits Americans; UNESCO returns dollars, data, influence and other assets," Sussman told the Senate Labor Committee. "Leaving ILO was a small loss, and returning was easy. Returning to UNESCO would be more difficult. There is no single U.S. constituency that dominates UNESCO policy as American labor influences U.S. policy at ILO."

Sussman is a longtime critic of the UNESCO debate on the new world information order and proposals that point to curtailment of press freedom, but he opposed a pullout, advocating a fight for reform from within the organization as the most viable means of change.

Indeed, Sussman, Mourik, Scheuer and others say that a lot of the fault with the state of UNESCO, and the enormous power now concentrated in M'bow's hands, lies with the West.

Over the years, the United States has not sought a leadership role at UNESCO. "That U.S. reluctance, even apathy, for some 15 years, helped produce some of the very flaws we now loudly attack," Sussman said. "Since announcing a year ago our withdrawal . . . this country has not provided even its closest allies with a specific list of grievances."

Mourik said making radical changes at UNESCO will take about the same effort as for a supertanker to change course, "certainly for structural and institutional reforms: For that, you need at least a session of the General Conference, UNESCO's highest body."

UNESCO's General Conference meets every two years with the next session set for Sofia, Bulgaria, next fall.

"Logic would have it that if the United States would like to see those structural changes, it should wait for the General Conference to discuss them," Mourik said.

In making its pullout decision, the administration bypassed the National Commission for UNESCO — a body authorized by Congress in 1946 — and gave only nodding attention to the hundreds of nongovernmental organizations associated with UNESCO that called for the decision's reversal. The commission adopted a resolution last week expressing regret about the pullout.

Similarly, most of the scientific, educational and other organizations affected by the decision are "looking at it in a different way than the administration," Wright said.

"They look at what they are concerned with — the scientists look at the scientific programs, the educators look at the literacy programs. There is no reason why they should be concerned with budget and mismanagement. And there is little reason for them to be concerned with politicization," Wright said.

UNESCO's maritime, copyright, reading, scientific and other programs are considered important, and the administration says that it will make every effort to continue subsidizing those programs and that any adverse consequences to U.S. industry can be met by establishing bilateral trading arrangements. "We're not going to throw out the baby with the bath," Wright said.

But that may not be so easy, says Douadou Dienne, director of UNESCO's New York liaison office. "This question has legal implications, and we don't know yet what are the programs the United States can participate in without being full members of UNESCO." He said that each request for participation would have to be studied separately.

Another concern is the 82 Americans on the staff of the UNESCO secretariat, 20 in high-level positions, who feel threatened by the move. As international civil servants, their positions should be protected, but the Soviet Union, for one, has called for a hiring quota system based on membership. At the ILO, American staff members lost their positions when the United States left, Sussman said.