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The US rejoins Unesco, analysis suggests the organisation being used as an extension of US foreign policy, as part of the ongoing 'war on terror'

Congress is expected to approve a \$71.4 million payment to Unesco, the first US contribution in 18 years

Jason Edward Kaufman

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President George W. Bush surprised the world when he announced that the US would rejoin Unesco, the cultural branch of the United Nations. The statement came during a speech by the president to the UN General Assembly last September. It was widely interpreted as a conciliatory gesture towards multilateralism at a time when the US was seeking global support for its campaign to disarm Iraq.

In February 2003, with US troops en route to the Persian Gulf and world leaders harshly criticising the US for moving towards almost unilateral military action, the Bush

administration asked Congress to allocate the \$71.4 million required to re-enter Unesco.

A careful analysis of statements made by administration officials and other politicians reveals that far from being a move towards multilateral collaboration, the decision to rejoin the organisation is seen by the Bush administration as simply another weapon in the US war on terror.

The American contribution will be the first since 1984, when the US withdrew in protest against mismanagement, corruption, and Third World bias. The UK and Singapore pulled out at the same time, but Britain rejoined in 1997. Since the Japanese deputy foreign minister, Koïchiro Matsuura, became Director-General in 1999, Unesco has cleaned up its act, reducing superfluous positions, insuring hiring based on merit, creating greater transparency in auditing, and renewing its dedication to press freedom and universal education.

Congress is expected to approve the payment to Unesco—which covers membership for the last quarter of fiscal year 2003 and all of fiscal year 2004—as part of the Federal budget for the new fiscal year beginning 1 October.

Secretary of State Colin Powell, laying out his budget before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, positioned the rejoining of Unesco within the administration's broader war against terrorism. One of the State Department's objectives, he said, is to “meet our obligations to international organizations. Fulfilling US commitments is vital to building coalitions and gaining support for US interests and policies in the war against terrorism and the spread of weapons of mass destruction.”

Secretary Powell acknowledged Unesco's role in contributing to peace and security by promoting collaboration and intercultural understanding, but he also referred more tactically to US efforts to “continue to eliminate support for terrorists and thus deny them safe haven through our ongoing public diplomacy activities, our educational and cultural exchange programs, and international broadcasting.” He cited \$296.9 million earmarked for “public diplomacy, including information and cultural programmes carried out by overseas missions and supported by public diplomacy personnel in our regional and functional bureaus. These resources are used to engage, inform, and influence foreign publics and broaden dialogue between American citizens and institutions and their counterparts abroad.”

The move to rejoin Unesco enjoys bilateral support. Tom Lantos, a Democratic Congressman from California and the ranking Democrat on the House International Relations Committee,

spearheaded a decade-long drive on Capitol Hill to rejoin the organisation, and introduced the bill that passed the House in May 2001—before 11 September, and before the president’s UN speech backing the proposal. “Membership in Unesco is clearly in US national interests,” Congressman Lantos states. “In promoting education, and scientific collaboration worldwide, Unesco addresses new threats to America’s security, including environmental crises, government corruption, and the spread of infectious diseases. In addition, Unesco’s programmes to promote understanding across cultures are a critical asset in our global effort to defeat the hatred that breeds terrorism.”

In a letter to Secretary of State Powell last December, Congressmen Lantos and Henry Hyde, the Illinois Republican who chairs the committee, indicated where they want the US to steer Unesco programmes. “Given the urgency of its mission,” they state, “Unesco must do more than organise seminars and hold meetings. The agency needs to take a more active role in promoting literacy in key front-line countries such as Afghanistan and Pakistan, in fostering greater respect for democratic freedoms, in removing hateful propaganda from textbooks, and in protecting cultural heritage sites around the world.”

Their counterparts on the Senate Committee on foreign Relations—the chairman, Indiana Republican Richard Lugar and ranking Democrat Joseph Biden of Delaware—echoed these concerns, particularly about anti-Western bias in schools, in a 5 March 2003 letter to Secretary Powell. “We support this decision and believe it provides a significant opportunity to advance important foreign policy goals for our country,” they state.

Why did the US leave Unesco in 1984? Ray Wanner, who spent 23 years as a State Department desk officer for Unesco until his retirement in 2002, recalls that the US withdrew when the G77 group of developing countries sought to license journalists as a way to limit the West’s control of the news. The US saw it as a threat to freedom of expression, and according to Mr Wanner, “It was seized upon by some people in the US government, mostly right-wing Republicans, who wanted us to withdraw from Unesco because they didn’t like the United Nations in general. They saw multilateral activities as a threat to our sovereignty, and Unesco became a target—the first block in the UN system to be demolished.”

“The withdrawal was intended as a preliminary step in withdrawing from, and rendering ineffective the UN, which they saw as limiting our ability to act unilaterally in the world,” says Mr Wanner recalling one US ambassador to the UN, Charles Lichtenstein, who said he “would look with satisfaction as the UN left New York.”

The move to rejoin Unesco appears to run counter to the current administration's drive to withdraw from multilateral agreements. In recent years we have seen several examples of Washington's unilateralist policies: withdrawal from the Kyoto treaty and a refusal to recognise the international criminal court at the Hague, to name but two.

The State Department positions the move to rejoin Unesco more as an extension of US foreign policy, which at this moment is focused on the war against terror. And rather than cultivate multinationalism, the trend has been to reduce expenditure on diplomacy of all kinds.

Mr Wanner says rejoining Unesco provides enhanced opportunities for the US to exercise public diplomacy. When the organisation's general conference convenes in Paris (28 September-18 October), US diplomats will meet with representatives from 189 countries, about 130 at ministerial level. "We'll have an opportunity to speak with them to make our case, to tell them why we came back into Unesco, why we support access to education for women, and why we think Unesco should launch an international offensive against terrorism, the roots of which are misunderstanding other peoples, religions and heritages. Unesco provides a platform to bring together some of Islam and Christianity's best thinkers and ask, Need there be this misunderstanding between us? We can take textbooks from Saudi Arabia, Serbia, Syria and go through them and say, 'Don't you think that phrase could make people hate non-Muslims? Unesco provides the forum for the exchange of these ideas," he says. "These are enormous opportunities we have, if we use them well."

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