

Operation or Cooperation--What Should Be  
the UN's Objective in Regards to Scientific  
Research?

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An impressive ad is appearing in weekly magazines asking you to "Name one good thing the UN ever did." The ad then answers this rhetorical question by listing numerous accomplishments which are quite impressive. But I could not help but recall Hamlet's line "The lady doth protest too much, methinks."

For example, the ad claims that "the UN is a clearing house for world cancer research. One scientist won't duplicate another's discovery." Every reader of CC<sup>®</sup> knows that we do not need an organization as elaborate as the UN to prevent research duplication.

I am not opposed to the UN, nor even to World Government--which the UN is not. But I am concerned about the effectiveness of the UN and organizations it fosters, such as UNESCO. Can the effectiveness of the UN be judged in terms of a specific list of accomplishments? Can we not ask whether the same group that discovered copper in Panama might have done it under the auspices of some other organization? Would the vaccination of children against TB have been more efficient and economic if handled through the tuberculosis associations? Would it have been better to channel the money through the World Bank or to give it directly to the peoples concerned? All members of the UN should

be asking such questions.

If you want to test your feelings about the UN, or world government, ask whether you would prefer that the US Congress or British Parliament or the French National Assembly donate all of next year's appropriations for research to a single international agency like UNESCO. The UN could then administer distribution of grant funds throughout the world. Instead of a peer review system as we know it in the US, one might find grantees selected by national quota. This would also be true for grant administrators. An 'International Institute of Health', if one were formed, would have directors chosen not in terms of research expertise but *first* because of nationality. Anyone who has dealt with the UN will know that these are not unjust speculations. Millions of dollars have been wasted by the UN and UNESCO because administrators are chosen first for their national origin, then for their technical or managerial qualifications.

Undoubtedly, much of this is oversimplification. Any government apparatus shares these shortcomings. I am far from an anarchist. But I do believe that to accomplish the goals of science we do not require more government operations. As I have written many times

before, I believe that governments should fund and stimulate research activities, but not perform them directly.<sup>1</sup> The computer age will make *less* government necessary if we are careful. If this has to be spelled out, consider what research in the US or UK would be like if it were performed entirely in government laboratories, with all research workers government employees. One may answer that this is precisely the case in many countries. I doubt seriously, however, that the majority of the world's scientists would choose to work under those circumstances. None of this detracts from the great achievements of NIH or other great governmental institutions. NIH became great because it did not rely exclusively on an intramural government program.

Does one have to be a Nixon conservative to fear more rather than less government research activity? It is certainly paradoxical that the man who prefers the idea of less government power should have been the one to abuse that power so shamefully. But before we adopt the notion that World Government is better than what we now

have we should seriously examine how well national governments work.

Many global problems have been dealt with outside of the UN or any other type of government structure. Thousands of international organizations have been spawned essentially by the drive and energy of individuals who believed in them. It was only later that governments and the UN turned to them for help in achieving particular objectives.

If these thoughts seem ambivalent--they are. When I read about UNISIST and other schemes of international scope, I am impressed equally by the possibilities and the dangers.<sup>2</sup> I am suspicious of hasty solutions to problems, but I have never resisted action when prompt decisions were required.

Before we accept glib solutions based on "internationalism" we should ask what the alternatives are. To many scientists UNESCO is like motherhood--beyond question. But in this generation we find even women, no less men, challenging the truism that motherhood is the highest of blessings.

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1. Garfield, E. "The Role of Government, Professional Groups, and Private Enterprise in Science Communication." Paper presented at the meeting of the Scientific and Technological Communications Committee, National Academy of Sciences, New York City, December 16, 1966.

2. ----- "The World Brain as Seen by an Information Entrepreneur." Paper presented at a Symposium on Reorganizing Information Resources to Improve Decision Making, Annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, San Francisco, February 27, 1974.