



Another U.N. "Reform". The new Human Rights Council is no improvement

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The Bush administration has decided not to run for a seat on the new U.N. Human Rights Council. The election, scheduled to take place in New York on May 9, is shaping up to be a nightmare for the United Nations, so there was good reason not to lend it credibility. But the real question is not whether the council will be inept, or whether it will use U.N. cover to demonize the United States and Israel while ignoring the human rights violations of the likes of China, Saudi Arabia, and Zimbabwe. The core issue is what the consequences of this fiasco should be for the American financial and political commitment to an unreformed U.N.

The council was created by the U.N. General Assembly on March 15 in a vote of 170 to 4 (United States, Israel, Marshall Islands, Palau), with 3

abstentions (Belarus, Iran, Venezuela). At the time, Under Secretary of State Nicholas Burns blunted the message of the U.S. "no" vote by telling reporters, "We'll look for ways to support [it]." The State Department, in last Thursday's announcement that the United States will not seek council membership this year, reiterated, "We will support the Council and we will continue to fund it."

But Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist has a different vision of constructive multilateralism. He submitted a resolution last week calling on the president not only to eschew a seat on the council, but also to "establish an effective human rights oversight body outside the United Nations system, so as to make it the primary means for examining, exposing, monitoring, and redressing human

rights abuses throughout the world." Membership in this body would be limited to states with "a demonstrated commitment to the protection of human rights."

To understand the importance of the action Frist proposes, it is necessary to be clear about what it would leave behind. There has been a massive disinformation campaign concerning the Human Rights Council, operated by General Assembly president Jan Eliasson, Secretary General Kofi Annan, and Congressman Tom Lantos, with added muscle from Ted Turner's U.N. Foundation and financier George Soros.

Despite these efforts, the U.N. Secretariat has had to produce some unambiguous rules to govern the election process, and these clarify the situation. A U.N. document released April 4 explains that "membership of the Council shall be open to all Member States of the United Nations." No substantive criterion of eligibility reflecting respect for human rights is required for membership. The document also makes obvious who will own the U.N.'s human rights agenda: Membership "shall be based on equitable geographical distribution and seats shall be distributed among the regional groups as follows: African Group 13, Asian Group 13, Eastern European Group 6, Latin American and Caribbean Group 8, Western European and Others Group (WEOG) 7." (The United States is in the WEOG group.)

Which brings us to the candidates that have put themselves forward.

First out of the gate for the African group is Algeria. And throwing their hats into the ring for the Asian group are China, Iran, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia, among others. The Latins? Cuba to start.

Congressman Lantos has expressed "outrage" that the United States isn't anxious to join the party. By running, he says, the United States could "ensure" that states with abysmal human rights records would not be elected. This ignores the facts of life at the U.N., where the United States is only one of 191 members. Feverish vote-swapping among regional groups is now in full swing for the secret-ballot election to the council, and one can be sure the horse trading has nothing to do with protecting human rights.

In another twist, countries standing for election can choose to make a public pledge that they will eventually protect human rights. In the words of the secretary general, "states wishing to be elected to the new Council will put forward their pledges and commitments to protect and promote human rights. It will be up to their fellow member states to evaluate these promises." The U.N., however, for reasons that became clear as soon as the Algerians and Cubans made their pledges, has decided not to translate these pledges, but to make them available only in their original language, thus impeding evaluation of their worth. So far, only 15 of the 42 declared candidates have made such pledges. While the U.N. budget for 2006-2007 anticipates that the organization will translate 582,781 pages (one-fifth of

the cost being borne by American taxpayers), the 15 pages of pledges won't be among them.

In short, nothing has changed. The newly "reformed" human rights body of the U.N. will once again include countries that have no interest in protecting human rights; the regions of the world with the fewest democracies will hold 55 percent of the seats. Standing in the background lamenting U.S. nonparticipation are some, like Amnesty International's Irene Khan, who be-

lieve that the "gulag of our times" is Guantánamo--not the Egyptian, Syrian, Iranian, and Sudanese torture chambers--and that the business of promoting human rights is best conducted with the delinquents on the inside, enjoying the privileges of the human rights club, instead of standing outside until they reform. Senator Frist suggests a bold new direction for the international promotion of human rights outside the United Nations. The time is ripe for such an initiative.

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