

Building a Stronger American Presence at the UN

Testimony by Deborah Derrick

Executive Director, Better World Campaign

August 1, 2007

U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the
District of Columbia
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and Members of the Committee – I'm pleased to be with you to talk about United Nations personnel issues. The Better World Campaign aims to help support the UN and its causes, and works especially to strengthen the US-UN relationship. It is a privilege to be engaged in such a mission and to share with you today our perspective on one key aspect of this relationship – which is American representation at the UN.

The U.S. was the driving force behind the UN's establishment, is its host, and its most generous financial supporter. Opinion polls show that Americans value the UN, see it as an important vehicle for sharing the burdens of American responsibilities around the world, and want the UN to continue to reform and renew itself to become a stronger, more effective institution.

Americans also want to be equitably represented within that institution. Yet the Government Accountability Office (GAO) recently concluded a study for you that found that Americans were underrepresented in at least three key UN agencies – echoing a GAO report that found the same problem in the UN system almost six years ago.

Mr. Chairman, you've already heard GAO's take on why Americans remain underrepresented in the UN system. In my testimony, I'd like to address the implications of this continuing shortfall and offer a few observations beyond those addressed by the GAO.

I believe that the under representation of Americans at the United Nations undermines the United States' global vision and its ability to conduct sound diplomacy in this key global institution. The UN is increasingly being asked to address the biggest problems in the world – from nuclear proliferation to global warming; from Darfur to Iraq. Having too few Americans in it means that the U.S. is operating at a disadvantage when it seeks to enact policies or reforms at the UN because it means that we do, and will, lack a cadre of experienced civil servants with solid insights in policy making within the UN. It forces the United States to use its biggest guns and the bluntest measures to get its way there – whether that is threatening to walk out of negotiations or standing alone in blocking budgets. In sum, the under representation of Americans within the UN system eliminates

tools from the U.S. national security tool kit at a time when Americans are facing huge international security challenges.

So I commend you, Mr. Chairman, for instigating this review by the Government Accountability Office. And I commend the GAO for a useful and enlightening report – and would like here to expand on a couple of its themes.

The GAO largely tagged State Department operations and UN structural barriers as being responsible for the shortfall of American representation in the UN system. I believe that the GAO missed one key point, though, and that is that this shortfall comes back to an overall question of inconsistent U.S. investments of all kinds in the UN system. While the report noted the precipitous drop in U.S. representation at UNESCO after the U.S.'s withdrawal from that agency, for example, the UNESCO case is really just an exaggerated version of U.S. activities in the multilateral system in recent years. An Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development report of last year, for example, noted that the proportion of U.S. foreign assistance funding going through multilateral agencies plummeted from 26% in 2000 to 8% in 2005, as the U.S. took a more unilateral tack in its foreign policy. This puts the U.S. near the bottom of the barrel in terms of how much assistance it leverages through multilateral institutions.

Thus, at the beginning of this year the U.S. was behind in its dues or in arrears in virtually every major international treaty organization that it belonged to, including the UN, NATO, World Health Organization, OECD, and the IAEA.

There's nothing particularly new in such shortfalls to the UN, of course. I work for an institution that was founded in 1998 when Ted Turner became alarmed by the fact that the U.S. had \$1 billion in debt to the UN and was in danger of losing its voting rights in the General Assembly. For a time, his efforts helped to get the U.S. back into good standing at the UN. But, as you may know, Mr. Chairman, the U.S. is sliding back towards owing another billion dollars to the United Nations. And, though the U.S. now has a more constructive relationship with the UN – and, in fact, has begun suggesting that the UN should take on a bigger role in Iraq – we've just come through an era where various parts of the United States government – including the U.S. mission to the UN – were routinely condemning the UN as inept or clamoring for dues withholdings.

Rather than working to influence the UN with an inside game – by paying our dues on time and in full and placing American civil servants within the UN system – the U.S. appears to have a history of relying on financial threats and public criticism to get its way at the UN. This is not the recommended way to influence friends and thwart enemies.

As for the particulars of State Department's work in this area, I believe that the system works pretty well for U.S. higher-level personnel in the UN, like Under Secretary-General Lynn Pascoe or Assistant Secretary-Generals Bob Orr or Jane Lute. Many more Americans, however, would welcome a chance to work at the UN at lower levels. When the UN's office in Washington DC recently advertised 2 positions, for example, it received 700 American applicants. But it's my impression that such lower level job

seekers are left to their own devices in figuring out how to apply for these jobs and assessing their costs and benefits -- like figuring out whether or not U.S. civil service separation and transfer benefits apply to UN positions (they do).

The GAO report noted that the State Department has recently increased the number of employees dedicated to helping Americans find their way into the UN system. I believe, though, that in the past few months a couple of political appointees assigned to the work have moved on. Further, there was general attrition of personnel dedicated to this task during the late 1990's and early 2000's. And while there is periodic talk of establishing junior officer positions for Americans at the UN, these positions are considered expendable when there are other staffing shortages in the Department. In sum, the State Department's International Organizations (IO) Bureau's efforts to place Americans within the UN system appear to wax and wane over time, much like political support for the UN in the United States -- ensuring that the U.S. lacks a long-term plan for strategically placing Americans within the UN system.

I would also take issue with the GAO report's suggestion that "most" of the barriers and challenges to hiring Americans at the UN are "outside of the U.S. government's control." Among the barriers and challenges cited are the UN's "non-transparent and lengthy" hiring processes, restrictions on the numbers of positions open to "external" candidates, and limited job opportunities for spouses. It seems a bit of a red herring to cite the UN's lengthy hiring process or questions of spousal employment when the State Department faces the same issues in its own recruitment and manages to fill its positions. And given that State Department personnel have some significant expertise in dealing with the UN system, State can and should work to make the UN's hiring processes more accessible and transparent to potential job applicants. I'd even partially question the suggestion that the U.S. has no control over the UN's relatively unattractive pay scales, because for years the U.S. has been the principal advocate for zero nominal growth in UN budgets -- meaning that UN salaries will be squeezed as inflation takes its toll.

More to the point, though, other countries with smaller GDPs are managing to find a way around these very same barriers. Many European countries are successfully facilitating recruitment by referring qualified candidates to the UN, conducting recruitment missions, and sponsoring Junior Professional Officers and Associate Expert positions. In fact, if you look at a list of the countries that sponsor personnel through the JPO and Associate Experts' programs -- including Austria, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Switzerland -- the United States' lack of participation is striking. The State Department can and should make the same kind of efforts in circumventing limits on so-called "external" hiring.

There are also a few barriers to U.S. representation at the UN that were not highlighted in the GAO report and deserve brief mention. One is language. Americans typically speak only one language -- and this puts them at a disadvantage when it comes to hiring in the UN system. Another is the general pressure in the UN system to recruit more nationals from developing countries; as the number of the world's nations has grown there has been an increased squeeze on the number of slots for all countries and this puts Americans at a competitive disadvantage. A third issue is the State Department's relative

lack of expertise in technical areas where many accessible UN jobs lie. Finally, I would be remiss if I failed to note the ill effect of under funding of the U.S. State Department. The U.S. Administration appears to have a great willingness to fund the costs of war but lacks a commensurate appetite for funding war prevention in the international affairs, or “150,” account.

Given the increasing importance of the UN to American national security interests, I’d recommend taking the following actions:

First, I think the U.S. government ought to increase the proportion of resources devoted to diplomacy and the State Department, altogether. And within the State Department’s budget, I’d advocate that there be more resources devoted to the technical side of the International Organizations Bureau, so that the U.S. might be better able to direct appropriate Americans toward non-Secretariat positions, like those in the WHO, FAO, or IAEA – where there may be more employment opportunities.

Second, I disagree with the GAO’s call to “study” the potential value of increased funding for JPO’s and Associate Experts in the UN system. The data is in and already well documented by the GAO. These mechanisms work. Now it’s time to commit resources – and I would note that Congress, itself, could create and enact legislation to expand the use of such positions.

Third, beyond the creation of a general employment roster, I would strongly encourage the U.S. to create a list for candidates for UN Peacekeeping Operations positions. The GAO report notes that other countries prescreen candidates for such positions, but this is a huge growth area in the UN – and one where the U.S. would be wise to develop and share expertise.

Finally, the Better World Campaign and United Nations Foundation will do what we can to help raise the visibility of UN positions among Americans. We recently supported a program to place American Fulbright Fellows in UNESCO and sponsored an “Americans at the United Nations” radio-based program. We also routinely provide links to the State Department’s employment web site in our briefing materials – and will continue to look for appropriate places to advance this cause.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify before you today on this important topic. I would be happy to take any questions on these matters.