

# UN human rights vote fuels US-Europe conflict

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The May 3 vote to remove the United States from the UN Commission on Human Rights has sparked a paroxysm of rage in official Washington and in the American media. Editorial and political comment has focused on the role of the European countries, and especially France, in delivering a deliberate slap to American foreign policy interests.

The 54-member economic and social council of the UN voted to fill 14 vacancies on the commission, including three seats reserved for the major industrialized countries. Other blocs of UN members, such as the African and Asian countries, nominated only as many candidates as they had assigned seats. But three European countries sought the three slots assigned to the Western bloc, forcing a secret ballot contest with the United States.

France won 52 votes, Austria 41 and Sweden 32, taking the three seats, with the US finishing last with 29 votes, despite having written pledges from 43 countries. American diplomats were stunned at the defeat, the first ever for the US in a vote for the Commission on Human Rights, which was founded in 1947 at the initiative of Eleanor Roosevelt, then the US Ambassador to the United Nations.

US officials had pressured either Austria or Sweden to drop their bid for seats, which would have made the election unnecessary, but neither country would agree to withdraw. The UN ambassadors of the European Union countries decided at a meeting last week to support the three European candidates and withhold votes from the United States.

The other 11 countries elected include three from Asia (Bahrain, Korea, Pakistan), two from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union (Croatia, Armenia), two from Latin America (Chile, Mexico), and four from Africa (Sierra Leone, Sudan, Togo and Uganda).

Shortly afterwards the same 54 countries voted to remove the United States from a second, lesser commission, the 13-member International Narcotics Control Board, which monitors compliance with UN conventions on drug trafficking and substance abuse. Iran, Brazil, Peru, India, the Netherlands, France and Austria were elected while a US candidate failed to win enough votes.

The human rights vote has little practical effect, since the commission has no real power, but it prevents the US from

introducing resolutions condemning China and Cuba, which it has done regularly at session after session. During the current year's meeting in Geneva, the anti-Cuban resolution was passed but the anti-China resolution was defeated.

But the action has great symbolic significance, since it demonstrates the increasing hostility which the aggressive and unilateral character of American foreign policy is generating, not only in the Third World, but among the European countries that once were considered Washington's closest allies.

The human rights vote came only days after the Bush administration declared its intention to abrogate the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty signed in 1972 with the Soviet Union, in order to pursue a new arms buildup including anti-missile defenses. Bush's speech repudiating the ABM treaty was followed this week by a speech from Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld outlining an intensification of US plans to develop weapons systems in outer space.

In the four months since Bush took office, the US government has repudiated another major global treaty, the Kyoto protocol on global warming, which sets targets for the restriction of greenhouse gas emissions and restraints on energy consumption. The Bush administration has also called into question US participation in the NATO military deployment in the Balkans, opposed any pressure on Israel to move to restart talks with the Palestinian Authority, and publicly denounced a draft treaty which calls for the creation of a permanent International Criminal Court to deal with war crimes. (The last action was insisted on by the Pentagon, since the military brass fears that it would be the target of charges over its actions in Iraq, Yugoslavia and in future conflicts.)

This arrogant disdain for the opinions of the rest of the world, and unwillingness to allow any international scrutiny of American policy, domestic or foreign, were reflected in the US role in the Commission on Human Rights itself. In the just-concluded six-week session, the US was almost alone in voting against commission resolutions calling on drug companies (mainly American) to provide low-cost AIDS medication to poor people infected with HIV, calling for a moratorium on the imposition of capital punishment, and declaring that the right to food should be considered an international human right. It also opposed a resolution criticizing Israel for human rights

violations in the killing of over 400 Palestinians on the West Bank and in Gaza since last October, and a resolution condemning “disappearances”—the kidnapping and murder of political oppositionists long practiced by US allies, especially in Latin America, during the Cold War.

By any objective standard, considering both its barbaric domestic practices such as the execution of juveniles and the mentally retarded and its reactionary foreign policy, the United States has no claim to be considered an advocate, let alone a paragon, of human rights. Yet the full array of official American opinion-makers voiced their outrage at the removal of the US from the commission.

First there were the US-based human rights organizations, including Amnesty International USA, which claimed that the removal of the US was “part of an effort by nations that routinely violate human rights to escape scrutiny.” A representative of Human Rights Watch said the UN commission was becoming “a rogues' gallery of human rights abusers.” But she added: “It wasn't just enemies. It was friends as well who voted the US out of the commission.”

Media commentators were in full cry against the UN, with some denouncing China and Cuba in strident anticommunist terms, and others focusing on the European countries.

*New York Times* columnist William Safire attacked the UN commission for blocking a resolution criticizing China and supporting one criticizing Israel, saying they were “a pack of hypocrites in approving a dictatorship's offense and condemning a democracy's self-defense.” He called for the CIA to find out which countries had signed pledges to support the US and then voted differently, so that the US could punish them. So much for the secret ballot!

The *Wall Street Journal* called for abolishing secret ballots outright, noting that the purpose of the secret ballot was to protect voters from “tyranny,” and this did not apply to countries voting at the UN. The newspaper was apparently unwilling to admit that any nation could want the protection of secrecy from retaliation by the world's only superpower, the United States of America.

Perhaps the most remarkably strident tone was set by the *Washington Post*, the major daily in the US capital, which targeted the European countries for its vitriol. Columnist Al Kamen wrote: “France, home to the glorious Vichy Regime, got 52 votes; Austria, grand masters of historical denial and boasting a foreign minister from neo-fascist Joerg Haider's party, got 41; Sweden, which conveniently sat out the Big One, got 32, beating the United States by three votes in the secret balloting.”

Another *Post* columnist, conservative Michael Kelly, declared that the US was being punished “because Europe's ruling classes will never forgive us for constructing a world in which they no longer rule over anything except artisan cheeses.... It is gratifying for our European friends to enjoy the full and unbridled expression of their contempt, and it is

gratifying for us to know that our European friends are, as they have been for—why, it's going on to a full century, isn't it?—still clueless.”

Democratic and Republican congressmen threatened retaliation against the United Nations as a whole. A spokesman for House Speaker Dennis Hastert said the House might refuse to authorize payment of the \$582 million in back dues to the UN. An agreement to pay up the back debt was approved last year by congressional Republican leaders after protracted lobbying by the Clinton administration, and the Bush White House had reaffirmed the plan.

While the House International Affairs Committee approved the back dues payment on May 8, it agreed to delay a scheduled payment of \$244 million in current dues unless the US is put back on the Commission on Human Rights in 2002.

Representative Tom Lantos, a California Democrat who is the co-chairman of the Congressional Human Rights Caucus, said, “It is absurd that rogue states and chronic human rights abusers such as Libya, Sudan and Cuba remain on the commission and sit in judgment on the human rights practices of others while the United States now stands on the sidelines.”

Senator Jesse Helms, the North Carolina Republican who is chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee who normally finds “communist” conspiracies everywhere, found a different target this time, declaring, “a few European countries maneuvered—in a secret vote—to eliminate the United States from the United Nations Human Rights Commission.”

A spokesman for Helms suggested that if the European Union was eager for unity—the supposed reason for backing three European countries for the Human Rights Commission—the same standard should be applied to the UN Security Council, where both Britain and France have permanent seats. The Helms aide suggested that Britain and France be replaced by a single representative of the European Union, and that Japan, which contributes the second-largest amount to the UN's finances, be given the available permanent seat.



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