

Statement on the U.S. Government Vetting of Scientists to Serve on International Advisory Bodies

August 18, 2004

The American Sociological Association (ASA), an organization of nearly 14,000 scientists, has grave concerns about reports from a number of affected individual scientists as well as in the press about the U.S. government's vetting of eminent scientists who have been asked by international bodies such as UNESCO and the World Health Organization (WHO) to contribute their scientific expertise on matters vital to health and related concerns in communities in the United States and around the world.

On behalf of the Association, the ASA Council strongly urges the President of the United States to advise his appointees—such as the U.S. Representative to the United Nations and the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)—to ensure that the U.S. Delegation to UNESCO, the Director of the HHS Office of Global Health Affairs (OGHA), and other such U.S. government representatives, do not interfere with the choices made by international bodies seeking expertise and input from recognized U.S. scientists. As a professional and learned society, the ASA believes that demonstrated, peer-recognized scientific expertise rather than adherence to particular policy positions is the criterion of selection that will ensure international bodies of importance to the United States receive the most useful knowledge available from our country's scientific community.

The ASA urges the President through his Secretary of HHS to suspend the unique and unprecedented interpretation of Public Health Service Commissioned Corps and Civil Service regulations (as described in an April 15, 2004, letter from HHS OGHA Director William Steiger to Denis G. Aitken, of the WHO, announcing that the Director of OGHA will now determine, in consultation with federal agency leadership, which scientists will be approved to participate in WHO's expert panels). The clear implication of this directive is that scientific expertise of U.S. scientists is destined to be, at best, a secondary criterion, and, at worst, an ignored criterion, yielding its critically important value to the inappropriate influence of "preferred" policy or political considerations.

Similarly, we urge the President to direct the U.S. Delegation to UNESCO to refrain from vetting U.S. scientists—duly selected by UNESCO for their expertise—based upon whether the delegation views their presumed policy or political views to be consistent with current U.S. policy. The ASA views this as dangerous position because the U.S. scientific community at large has worked for many decades to build, bolster, and protect the longstanding international scientific credibility and leadership of the United States. Even the impression that U.S. scientists chosen as experts are only providing knowledge that supports existing U.S. government policies on WHO panels, in UNESCO or other such venues, at the expense of sound science, would initiate an intolerable descent of American science's heretofore unmatched prestige and influence on the international scene. The inevitable result will be fewer invitations for U.S. scientists to contribute to scientific discourse at the international level and the consequent lessening of U.S. influence and relevance.