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UN A GLOBAL NANNY

Even though it's been obvious ever since the Korean War that the United Nations is incapable of keeping world peace, the popular justification for its cost is that the UN does a great many other useful things. Dr. Murray L. Weidenbaum, former Presidential adviser and now Director of the Center for the Study of American Business, has just punctured this myth in testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

In fact, he said, the UN engages in a lot of mischief-making in its efforts to control and regulate world economies. The UN looks like it is trying to beccome a "global nanny" -- and that's something the American private-enterprise system doesn't need.

Dr. Weidenbaum hit the internationalist do-gooders right in the spot where it would hurt the most by dissecting the UN's proposed Consumer Protection Guidelines. He charges that they not only have the earmarks of becoming "a blueprint for a more centrally directed society," but they would even "flunk a truth-in-labeling test."

While this UN proposal is blanketed with layers of lovely words such as safety, purity, consumer education, and international cooperation, Dr. Weidenbaum concludes that consumers would be hurt more than protected if its grandiose schemes ever went into effect.

The UN Guidelines state that their objective is "to facilitate production patterns geared to meeting the most important needs of consumers." In a private-enterprise economy like ours, the pressures of the marketplace do exactly that (without any UN help).

But the UN Guidelines imply that an all-wise central government should identify "the most important needs" of consumers, and then use controls and governmental decision-making to meet those needs. Just look at the results in the centrally-planned Communist countries; most of them can't even feed themselves.

In Russia, such central planning to meet consumer needs has in the past resulted in such idiocies as manufacturing shoes of only one size each year. If you wear a size 12, you have to wait until the year when size 12s are made in order to get a new pair.

Another lofty goal of the UN Guidelines is: "To curb business practices at the national and international levels which adversely affect consumers." But how do you define it? An "adverse effect" in India or Zaire could be a salutary effect for consumers in the Caribbean or Columbia. Who is the all-wise mogul in the UN to decide what is "good" and what is "bad"?

As Dr. Weidenbaum points out, nearly any product or business practice can be arbitrary labeled "abusive" when it is held up against a standard that cannot be achieved, or for which consumers do not wish to pay. Brand X Soap might be held to "adversely affect" consumers simply because it does not have the "ideal" qualities of Brand Y Soap.

Another vague, far-reaching objective of the UN Guidelines is: "To promote just, equitable and sustainable economic and social development." But who will determine what is just? Why is an international bureaucrat better able to determine which consumer products are "sustainable" than those who voluntarily spend their own money for the products?

At least one of the UN Guidelines is good for a laugh: "To establish standards of ethical conduct for those engaged in production and distribution of goods and services to consumers." Who will be the czar of "ethical conduct"? Russia?

The UN Guidelines present a list of new "rights," including the right to "physical safety from dangerous goods and services" and "economic safety from offenses or malpractices." The Guidelines fail to mention that safety must be balanced with costs. Who will decide what are "dangerous goods and services"? As Dr. Weidenbaum points out, few consumer products can compete with with the kitchen knife in terms of injuries.

You can get a feel for the bias of the Guidelines by noting that they give consumer organizations the "right" to "be consulted and to have their views represented in the decision-making process." There are, however, no provisions for representing the views of private enterprise.

Furthermore, the Guidelines talk about "the decision-making process" as though only one can exist. That is the giveaway that the Guidelines are not intended for free, private-enterprise economies, but are designed to establish or promote centralized, planned economies in which national governments make the key economic decisions.