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Will New York Say Bonn Voyage to the UN?

The United Nations, like almost every 49 year old, is facing a mid-life crisis. It has to control its costs and appetite for new layers of bureaucracy, while learning how to live in a post-Communist world. A recent Ford Foundation report calls for the UN to consolidate its offices, which are spread around the world, and trim its organizational waistline. The report has serious implications for New York City, since the German government is desperately trying to lure the United Nations to Bonn, where there will soon be a surplus of vacant office space once the capital moves to Berlin.

New York City's role as an international capital will be seriously diminished if we don't launch an aggressive effort to keep the UN here. It is far more important to the city's economy than the Yankees, and Germany poses far more serious competition than the State of New Jersey. It's time for New York's political and civic leadership to recognize the UN's pervasive impact on our economic and social life and to develop a strategy to retain and expand its presence.

Although most New Yorkers take the UN for granted, the development of the headquarters on the East River happened not by chance but because of John D. Rockefeller's visionary philanthropy, a city government willing to acquire land and an interest-free loan from the federal government. The UN is one of the city's few brilliant examples of waterfront development, combining open space, a promenade and offices over a highway on what was once run-down Turtle Bay. Just compare the UN with its crosstown counterpart, the Jacob Javits Convention Center, a magnificent megastructure that stands alone, shut off from the rest of the city and its adjacent waterfront.

The UN, though, does more for New York than just occupy a 16-acre site on the East River. With more than 180 members, the headquarters is a magnet for foreign consulates, missions and international agencies, mostly situated on the east side. Without them, the real estate market on First and Second avenues would qualify as a federal disaster area.

The UN's principal activities - meetings, receptions and private talks - are ideally suited to New York. In what other city in the world is conversation so highly valued, so easy to arrange and feasible, given the city's multilingual translation force? Not even the publishing industry does as much for the restaurant and catering business, since the three-hour UN lunch break is widely regarded as the most productive part of a diplomat's day, occasionally matched by a plethora of cocktail parties and evening receptions.

It would be ironic if Germany - not known for its commitment to racial tolerance and ethnic diversity, not to mention that its aggressive behavior created the need for a United Nations in

the first place - was to emerge as the UN's new home. However, that may happen unless New York adopts a bold strategy equivalent to the approach used almost 50 years ago.

As global trade increases and regional conflicts multiply, the UN will be asked to take on more, not fewer, responsibilities. The headquarters can remain at its current site, but a new residential and office complex should be built - with federal government financing - across the East River on the 75-acre site controlled by the Queens West Development Corporation. With ferry service linking the two, the UN would be able to have sufficient space to consolidate its activities, house its employees and even establish an academy for peacekeeping.

With the UN preparing for its golden anniversary in 1995, New York should take the opportunity to reaffirm its status as a global mecca. Otherwise, the UN's 50th birthday may also be its last in New York City.

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