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UNITED NATIONS REPORT ON INTERNET GOVERNANCE MERITS CONCERN AND SCRUTINY

by
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On July 14, 2005, the United Nations' Working Group on Internet Governance (WGIG) issued a final report suggesting that the U.N. assume global governance of the Internet. Since its inception and creation in the United States, the U.S. has assumed the historic role of overseeing the Internet's growth and development. The U.N. taskforce report suggests that in addition to terminating the U.S.'s leadership role, the authority and functions of the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), a non-profit organization overseen by the U.S. Department of Commerce, should be transferred as well.

WGIG was formed following the December 2003 U.N. World Summit on Information Policy with the intention of simply developing a consensus definition for "Internet governance" and identifying relevant public policy issues. Ultimately the task force exceeded its mandate and laid out four policy recommendations for the future of Internet governance. One unifying theme is that there should be "a further internationalization of Internet governance arrangements" because of WGIG's belief that "no single government should have a pre-eminent role in relation to international Internet governance." In other words, this U.N. task force report suggests that the historic role of the United States in overseeing the Internet's growth and shepherding its development should be terminated and that Internet governance should be politicized under U.N. auspices. The most extreme of the options laid out by the WGIG would transfer the authority and functions of ICANN to a new body linked to and controlled by the United Nations. This would put international bureaucrats in charge of the Internet and relegate the private sector to a mere advisory role. Any proposal to hand over control of Internet governance to the United Nations should be subject to intense scrutiny.

The Internet was created in the United States and has flourished under U.S. supervision and oversight. The United States's fair and light-handed role in Internet governance has assured security and reliability. While the roots of the Internet lie in the Department of Defense's 1969 ARPANet project, the true birth of the modern Internet began ten years ago when the National Science Foundation opened the Internet to commerce and the Netscape browser became available so that the general public could "surf" the World Wide Web. The explosive and hugely beneficial growth of the Internet over the past decade did not result from increased Government involvement but, on the contrary, from the opening of the Internet to commerce and private sector innovation. Subjecting the Internet to the politicized control of the U.N. bureaucracy would be a giant and foolhardy step backwards.

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The Internet has historically expanded the free flow of information and commerce. With each passing year it assumes greater economic importance, both in the value of the commerce it facilitates as well as the functions it performs. Some of the nations involved in the WGIG deliberations have established pervasive Internet censorship and monitoring systems to suppress the ability of their citizens to access the truth, and to stifle legitimate political discussion and dissent. Others maintain a state monopoly over telecommunications services, or subject them to excessive taxation and regulation. Allowing such nations a voice in fundamental Internet governance would be dangerous and imprudent.

The WGIG report further contemplates an expanded U.N. role on cyber-security matters. This is also deeply troubling. We simply cannot risk a disruption of the information economy by cyber-terrorists. It would be naive and foolish if we did not assume that some of the individuals active in these terrorist organizations possess the technical expertise to plan and execute crippling attacks on the Internet, and that they are pondering how to crash the Net with the same diligence that Osama bin-Laden devoted to bringing down the World Trade Center. It is true that the Internet was designed to be resilient against outside attacks, as ARPANet was conceived as a communications system that could survive the exchange of nuclear weapons. But we have learned in recent years that the greatest threats to Internet security are generated from within. America's vital national security interests demand that we maintain an Internet governance regime capable of taking effective preventive measures against any attack that could wreak havoc upon us.

The continued assurance of competent and depoliticized Internet governance is clearly a matter of strategic importance to the security of the United States and to the entire world economy. The Bush administration announced on June 30, 2005 that the United States would maintain its historic role over the Internet's master "root" file that lists all authorized top-level domains. The U.S. Principles on the Internet's Domain Name and Addressing System issued last month are: (1) The U.S. Government will preserve the security and stability of the Internet's Domain Name and Addressing System, DNS. It will take no action with the potential to adversely impact the effective and efficient operation of the DNS; (2) Governments have a legitimate interest in the management of their own country code top level domains (ccTLD). The U.S. will work with the international community to address these concerns in a manner consistent with Internet stability and security; (3) ICANN is the appropriate technical manager of the Internet DNS. The U.S. will continue to provide oversight so that ICANN maintains its focus and meets its core technical mission; and (4) Dialogue related to Internet governance should continue in relevant multiple fora. The U.S. will encourage an ongoing dialogue with all stakeholders around the world, and in the ensuing discussions, the U.S. will continue to support market-based approaches and private sector leadership in the Internet's further development.

President Bush has clearly and forcefully asserted that the U.S. has no present intention of relinquishing the historic leading role it has played in Internet governance, and articulated a vision of the Internet's future that places privatization over politicization. At the same time the administration has recognized the need for a continuing and constructive dialogue with the world community on the future of Internet governance.

The growth of the Internet over the past decade, under the leadership and supervision of the United States, has been extraordinary. Over the next decade we can expect to see the global population with Internet access grow far beyond the one billion persons who presently enjoy that ability. The population of the developing world deserves the access to knowledge, services, commerce, and communication that the Internet can provide, along with the accompanying benefits to economic development, education, health care, and the informed discussion that is the bedrock of democratic self-government. Of course, the Department of Commerce needs to exercise the proper amount of oversight over ICANN to make sure the rules of the game are transparent, pro-consumer, and pro-competitive. So the last thing we should do is insert the United Nations into Internet governance. This would be a dangerous detour likely to hinder, if not cripple, the fulfillment of the promise of the most dynamic and important communications infrastructure in all of human history. We simply cannot afford the delay and diversion that would result from such an unfortunate deviation from the path that has brought the Internet to its present and miraculous state of success.