

UNITED NATIONS

The League's History

At the first League convention in 1920, delegates called for “adhesion of the United States to the League of Nations with least possible delay,” in recognition of the need for a mechanism to facilitate settlement of international disputes. But when the issue of U.S. participation in the League of Nations turned into a bitter partisan battle, active League support did not materialize until 1932, after the takeover of Manchuria by Japan.

During World War II, the League, conscious of its earlier hesitancy, began to study “U.S. participation in the making and execution of plans for worldwide reconstruction and for a postwar organization for peace to eventually include all peoples, regardless of race, religion or political persuasion.” In 1944, the League supported “U.S. membership in an international organization for the peaceful settlement of disputes, with the machinery to handle economic, social and political problems.”

Even before the United Nations was formally established, the League launched an unprecedented nationwide campaign to help build public understanding of the Dumbarton Oaks and Bretton Woods agreements to establish the United Nations, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. The League trained more than 5,000 speakers and distributed more than a million brochures during a six-month period. At the UN Charter Conference in 1945, the League was one of 42 nongovernmental organizations invited by President Truman to serve as a consultant to the U.S. delegation. Since that time, the League has continued its presence at the United Nations through its UN Observer. The LWVEF periodically hosts “League Day at the UN” to provide a first-hand opportunity for League members to visit the UN, speak with United Nations’ officials and learn more about the work of its agencies.

The UN position continued to evolve through further study. By 1948, the League was calling for the strengthening of the United Nations and its specialized agencies through increased use, adequate financial contributions and improved procedures. The League also supported the UN’s peacekeeping functions. In 1962, the League evaluated “means of strengthening the UN under present conditions,” most notably heightened antagonisms between the United States and the Soviet Union.

In 1976, the League reexamined the UN system “with emphasis on relations between developed and developing countries and their implications for U.S. policy.” Members studied how world issues had changed alignments at the United Nations from a primarily East-West focus to an increasingly rich-nation/poor-nation focus and what this change meant for U.S. participation in the UN system. The result was a resounding reaffirmation of the League’s support for a strengthened UN system. League members agreed that the U.S should work constructively within the United Nations to further our foreign policy goals.

The League consistently monitors U.S. actions at the United Nations-sometimes praising, sometimes criticizing, always urging the United States to upgrade the role of the United Nations in its foreign policy. The League also continues to support the UN system by lobbying for adequate funding for the organization, both by regular assessments and by voluntary contributions. The LWVUS has continued to

work with other concerned organizations to urge Congress to meet its financial obligations to the UN, including paying all arrearages. In the 105th Congress, the League stepped up the pressure for full payment of U.S. obligations to the UN. In addition, the League vigorously opposes actions to restrict U.S. contributions to the United Nations and its specialized agencies.

The League has worked for the greater use and strengthening of the UN peacekeeping machinery. In addition, under the UN position in support of “continuing efforts to reduce the risk of war,” the League has lobbied for Senate ratification of certain disarmament measures, notably the nuclear nonproliferation treaty, negotiated through the UN. And, year after year, Leagues work in their communities to develop public understanding and awareness of UN accomplishments, limitations and potential. In 1995, as the League celebrated its 75 anniversary and the United Nations its 50th, that work took on special significance.

In September 1995, an LWVEF delegation participated in the UN Fourth World Conference on Women and the NGO Forum on Women in Beijing, China. The LWVEF sponsored workshops on “Organizing Candidate Debates” and “Making Democracy Work: Strategies for Grassroots Organization, Education and Advocacy.”

In July 1997, the League was granted Special Consultative Status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council, which provides the opportunity to make interventions on issues the League supports. The LWV joined other NGOs in submitting an official statement on behalf of the Girl Child that was presented at the UN Commission on the Status of Women meeting in March 2000. As members of the Steering Committee for the NGO UNICEF Working Group on Girls at the UN, League UN Observers participated in the effort to focus world governments on the plight of girls.

In November 1999, the League was a cosponsor of a regional conference of the President’s Interagency Council on Women, “Women 2000: Beijing Plus Five,” to prepare for the Special Session of the General Assembly, “Women 2000, Gender Equality, Development and Peace for the Twenty-First Century.” The League’s UN Observers were accredited to attend this special session, informally referred to as Beijing+5, in June 2000. The League continues to push for full payment of U.S. financial obligations to the UN and for full U.S. participation in the UN system.

In June 2002, the LWVUS submitted testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in support of Senate ratification of CEDAW (UN Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women).

In September 2002, the LWVUS President sent a letter to President George W. Bush urging him to work with the UN to develop clear policy goals and actions with regard to the U.S.’s possible intervention in Iraq. Upon initiation of combat operations in Iraq, the League’s Board of Directors issued a statement saying that continued diplomatic efforts through the UN would have better served international unity and that military force should have been used as a tool of last resort.

Working closely with the League’s UN Observers, the LWVUS cosponsored a conference entitled What Future for the United Nations in November 2003.

In March 2004, the League joined other NGOs in submitting an official statement to the UN Commission on the Status of Women for the follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women. The statement advocated protecting girls' rights by taking a life cycle approach to gender issues, and encouraged the commission to use the exploration of the role of men and boys in gender equality as a way to continue to further the rights of girls.

In 2005, the League sent a letter to President Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, urging them to support the goals of the UN's 2005 World Summit Outcome Document, which represented an historic effort to end global poverty, promote peace and strengthen the United Nations. Later that year, the League urged Congress to reject the United Nations Reform Act, legislation that would have severely limited the ability of the UN to carry out its work.

Finally, Leagues throughout the country are working to realize the goals of the United Nations' Millennium Goals outlined by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan at the September 2000 Millennium Summit and adopted by 191 states.

In 2008, the League joined with other NGOs in an official statement to the UN Commission on the Status of Women emphasizing that financing for girls' equality and for the empowerment of girls is a basic and sound strategy for the implementation of all human rights. The League also joined the United Nation's Campaign UNITE to End Violence against Women, 2008-2015, with the overall objective of raising public awareness and increasing political will and resources for preventing and responding to all forms of violence against women and girls – in all parts of the world.