



# Ethical ction Report

*A publication of the American Ethical Union (AEU)*

---

Number 11-12

December 2011

## **In this issue:**

**Reform Capitalism by Supporting the Benefit Corporation Model**

**Support U. S. Funding of UNESCO**

**Maintain U. S. Opposition to Torture**

**Consider Alternative Giving this Holiday Season**

---

## **Reform Capitalism by Supporting the Benefit Corporation Model**

Corporations are as powerful in America as ever, perhaps even as powerful as during the Gilded Age era of Robber Baron ruthlessness. Today most businesses operate solely to maximize shareholder profit. Recent developments enhancing corporate power include the Supreme Court's *Citizens United* ruling defining corporations as "persons" and freeing them to spend unlimited funds for electioneering communication.

This blow to the McCain-Feingold law allows businesses to manipulate politics so as to stoke the fevered competition for maximum profits. When the government does manage to influence a certain corporation, globalization allows businesses to move overseas to places without socially responsible regulations.

Fortunately a more ethical model is emerging – *Benefit Corporations* (B-Corps.) Articles of incorporation of B-Corps include the goal of having a "positive impact on society and the environment." This helps socially responsible corporations avoid the "profits only" myopia behind the socially destructive behavior of Enron, AIG, Lehman Brothers, Blackwater, Exxon Mobil, and others.

To assure that companies don't simply offer a facade of ethics by calling themselves B-Corps, third party validators like *B Lab*, a Philadelphia-based alliance, certifies that businesses not only defend shareholder interest but also honor the integrity of their employees, customers, communities and environments. According to the website <http://www.bcorporation.net/>, B-Corps are a better way to do business - one that "meets rigorous and independent standards of social and environmental performance, accountability, and transparency."

The B-Corp "Declaration of Interdependence" reflects Ethical Culture values: *We hold these truths to be self-evident: That we must be the change we seek in the world. That all business ought to be conducted as if people and place mattered. That, through their products, practices, and profits, businesses should aspire to do no harm and benefit all. To do so requires that we act with the understanding that we are each dependent upon another and thus responsible for each other and future generations.*

Maryland became the first state to pass Benefit Corp legislation in April 2010 with several states following suit, including Vermont, California, Hawaii, Virginia, and New Jersey. A number of other states have recently passed B-Corp laws, or have pending legislation. Support such

progressive economic policy in your state and patronize B-Corps in your financial and ethical planning!

For more information see Maryland State Senator Jamie Raskin's article, "The Rise of Benefit Corporations" from *The Nation* at <http://www.thenation.com/article/161261/rise-benefit-corporations>.

---

## Support U. S. Funding of UNESCO

On October 31, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) voted 107-14, with 52 abstentions, to admit Palestine as a member state. As a result the United States announced that it is effectively withdrawing support for UNESCO. While the intricacies of Middle East peace efforts are complex, the work of UNESCO is broad and important. Whatever your position is on the Middle East, ask the White House to continue financial support of UNESCO.

Such advocacy mirrors the position taken by the International Humanist and Ethical Union. According to a November 24th statement on the IHEU website (<http://www.iheu.org/statement-iheu-following-36th-session-general-conference-unesco>), "UNESCO ought to have the financial resources to fulfill its mission to promote democratic values and a culture of peace." The IHEU also praised UNESCO's "sustained efforts towards universal literacy, to defend and conserve natural landscapes and cultural heritage, education, the sciences, culture, communication and the freedom of expression of information."

Given the fact that the U. S. contributes an estimated \$80 million a year – approximately 22% of UNESCO's budget — this action could affect the continuation of UNESCO's programs such as *Education For All* and efforts to fight discriminatory practices against women, 'untouchable' communities, and sexual minorities.

UNESCO is not perfect, and the United States need not agree with all of its programs. Even the IHEU criticized UNESCO for failing to act forcefully enough to minimize minority abuse around the world, end the death penalty, or prohibit arms trade. But withdrawal of U. S. funding puts at risk the future of important work of concern to humanists and progressives. In addition, if the U. S. does not pay its dues for two years, it will lose its voting status in UNESCO.

Urge the administration to reconsider its withdrawal of UNESCO funding.

For more information, please see [http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/campaign-k-12/2011/11/us\\_again.html](http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/campaign-k-12/2011/11/us_again.html) and [http://www.stltoday.com/news/national/article\\_5c2faf7f-cc30-5f43-b4bb-06da7edde051.html](http://www.stltoday.com/news/national/article_5c2faf7f-cc30-5f43-b4bb-06da7edde051.html)

---

## Maintain U. S. Opposition to Torture

There are two disturbing signs that torture is creeping back into U. S. military and security affairs. First, according to the *National Religious Campaign Against Torture* ([www.tortureisamoralissue.org](http://www.tortureisamoralissue.org)), at the time of this writing our lawmakers are considering an amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act that would partially reverse President Obama's ban on torture. Senator Ayotte's amendment #1068 would create a list of secret interrogation techniques that would not be publicly listed in the U.S. Army Field Manual. Such a list could contain abusive methods and even torture, representing a step backwards in our efforts to ensure ethical and effective ways to assure national security. If passed, Amendment #1068 would erode the Detainee Treatment Act passed by Congress 90-9 in 2005, and also require the White House to adopt a secret annex to the Army's interrogation manual.

Second, after 10 years of promises about protecting human rights in Afghanistan, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has verified "systemic torture" by U. S. trained and funded

Afghan security forces. As described in an October 10 *New York Times* article, the so-called Leahy Law of the 1990's prohibits any U.S. funding, weapons or training for security forces in other countries committing gross human rights. There is, however, a loophole: the U. S. Secretary of State can waive the ban by issuing a finding that the Afghan government is taking remedial measures, including bringing responsible members of the torture units "to justice," and that "all necessary corrective steps have been taken."

Ethical Culture has a history of opposing torture, most recently represented by a 2008 American Ethical Union resolution that stated, "respect and reverence for human dignity is the foremost principle of Ethical Culture, and the use of torture is the most heinous violation of human dignity." Reinforce this resolution! Demand that your representative and the White House both resist the establishment of secret lists of interrogation techniques and pressure Afghanistan officials to improve their human rights record dramatically.

---

## Consider Alternative Giving this Holiday Season

Many Ethical Action Report installments point readers toward specific issues and concrete legislation. This entry is different. It recommends taking a deep breath, resisting the blind materialism that has taken over the winter holiday seasons, and considering some intriguing alternatives.

Over a hundred years ago, Felix Adler, the founder of Ethical Culture, warned that shallowness and conspicuous consumption get in the way of a fulfilling life. Buying, giving, and receiving excessive presents does not ultimately bring out our best. Now, in the month of most frenzied and conspicuous consumption, is the time to choose a different path.

Maybe you, like Leader Susan Rose, already have celebrated *Buy Nothing Day*, which occurs on the same day as "Black Friday." Or, if susceptible to "debt dependency," you might have already participated in the *Credit Card Cut Up* when you kick the buying habit by gathering with others in the center of a mall to cut your credit cards in half!

There also are organizations you can support, like the *Center for a New American Dream*, that aim to redefine what our country is all about. The Center's mission is to help Americans "reduce and shift their consumption to improve quality of life, protect the environment, and promote social justice." The website continues: "The Center seeks to cultivate a new American dream—one that emphasizes community, ecological sustainability, and a celebration of non-material values, while upholding the spirit of the traditional American dream of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." They offer information and seek donations at <http://www.newdream.org/>.

If you want to continue some form of the gift-giving tradition, consider progressive local options such as alternative gift fairs where you can buy environmentally sensitive, free-trade or locally produced products. Better yet, many of these fairs offer gifts that you give to those in great need *in the name of* a friend or relative. This might include "a month's supply of formula for an orphaned infant in Africa, an acupuncture session for a wounded soldier, or... a day of meals for a homebound senior."

A website with multiple options and a relatively high rating is *Alternative Gifts International* at <http://www.altgifts.org/>. More targeted sites to explore include: *Freedom from Hunger* <http://www.freedomfromhunger.org/>, the *Fruit Tree Planting Foundation* <http://www.ftpf.org/>, *Sustainable Harvest* <http://www.sustainableharvest.org/>, and *VegFam* <http://www.dooyoo.co.uk/services-misc/vegfam/1205060/>.

Some of the most ethically effective gifts that can be purchased in the name of a loved one or friend are microloans through organizations like *Kiva* <http://www.kiva.org/>. Not only does the gift go directly to entrepreneurs in underserved areas of the world, they require reciprocity and responsible actions by those being helped. These are not handouts. The loans help bring out the best in others, the loans are repaid, and then they can be reinvested in another business. It is truly a gift that keeps on giving. Happy ethical holidays to you all!

## Contacting Elected Officials

### White House

#### *Mailing Address*

The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20500

#### *Phone Number*

Comments: (202) 456-1111  
Fax: (202) 456-2461

#### *E-mail*

President Barack Obama:  
president@whitehouse.gov

Vice President Joseph Biden:  
vice.president@whitehouse.gov

### Congress

#### *Mailing Address*

United States Senate  
*Or*  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

#### *Phone Number*

Capitol Switchboard: (202) 224-3121

#### *E-mail*

Visit [www.senate.gov](http://www.senate.gov) or [www.house.gov](http://www.house.gov) to use your representatives' e-mail contact forms.

This AEU Ethical Action Report was written and edited by Hugh Taft-Morales with editorial help from Amanda Poppei, Hank Gassner and Rich Reiss.

*The volunteers who produce the American Ethical Union's Ethical Action Report (EAR) thank the many organizations that send out press releases and supply information on the web about important issues and legislation. Each entry in this EAR is a composite created out of the text from many sources as well as original writing. The copy presented here is not all original wording.*

American Ethical Union  
2 West 64<sup>th</sup> Street, New York, NY 10023  
[www.aeu.org](http://www.aeu.org) Tel: 212-873-6500 [report@aeu.org](mailto:report@aeu.org)

To share your views on national legislation with the Secular Coalition for America (SCA) go to:  
[www.secular.org](http://www.secular.org)

---

---

The *Ethical Action Report* does not represent the views of the American Ethical Union. The American Ethical Union takes ethical positions on public affairs only through resolutions adopted by its Assembly or Board. Past AEU resolutions are available, searchable by date or topic, at:  
<http://aeu.org/library/byresolution.php?case=resolutions>.

---

---