

U.S. Ratifies Treaty to Protect Cultural Property in Time of War

The United States Senate has voted to ratify the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict. This international convention regulates the conduct of nations during war and military occupation in order to assure the protection of cultural sites, monuments and repositories, including museums, libraries and archives. Written in the wake of the widespread cultural devastation perpetrated by Nazi Germany during World War II, and modeled on instructions given by General Eisenhower to aid in the preservation of Europe's cultural legacy, the Hague Convention is the oldest international agreement to address exclusively cultural heritage preservation. The United States now joins 121 other nations in becoming a party to this historic treaty. By taking this significant step, the U.S. demonstrates its commitment to the preservation of the world's cultural, artistic, religious and historic legacy.

Although the United States signed the Convention soon after its writing, the Pentagon objected to ratification because of increasing Cold War tensions. Only with the collapse of the Soviet Union did the U.S. military withdraw its objections, and President Clinton transmitted it to the Senate in 1999. The public attention given to the looting of the Iraq Museum in Baghdad, and the looting of archaeological sites in southern Iraq during the ensuing years revived interest in the Convention, and the Senate finally voted to give its advice and consent to ratification on September 25, 2008.

While U.S. policy has been to follow the principles of the Convention, ratification will raise the imperative of protecting cultural heritage during conflict, including the incorporation of heritage preservation into military planning, will clarify the United States' obligations, and will encourage the training of military personnel in cultural heritage preservation and the recruitment of cultural heritage professionals into the military. Cori Wegener, President of the U.S. Committee of the Blue Shield, noted that "Ratification of the Hague Convention provides a renewed opportunity to highlight cultural property training for U.S. military personnel at all levels, and to call attention to cultural property considerations in the early stages of military planning. The U.S. Committee of the Blue Shield will continue its commitment to offering cultural property training and coordination with the U.S. military and to increase public awareness about the 1954 Hague Convention and its international symbol, the Blue Shield."

Patty Gerstenblith, President of the Lawyers' Committee for Cultural Heritage Preservation, cited among the advantages of ratification, "Most importantly, it sends a clear signal to other nations that the United States respects their cultural heritage and will facilitate U.S. cooperation with its allies and coalition partners in achieving more effective preservation efforts in areas of armed conflict."

The Archaeological Institute of America has advocated ratification of the Hague Convention for more than fifteen years. John Russell, Vice President for Professional Responsibilities of the AIA, commented that "By ratifying the 1954 Hague Convention, the U.S. has affirmed its commitment to protecting cultural property during armed conflict. The Archaeological Institute of America will continue to work with the Department of Defense to integrate the Convention's provisions fully and consistently into the U.S. military training curriculum at all levels."

Since the founding of the Lawyers' Committee for Cultural Heritage Preservation in 2004 and of the U.S. Committee of the Blue Shield in 2006, ratification has been among their primary priorities. AIA, LCCHP, & USCBS formed a coalition of preservation organizations that submitted testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in support of ratification and worked with members of the Senate to achieve this historic step. The Statement of the Archaeological Institute of America, the Lawyers' Committee for Cultural Heritage Preservation, and the U.S. Committee of the Blue Shield urging Senate ratification, joined by twelve other cultural preservation organizations, is available at: <http://www.culturalheritagelaw.org/advocacy>. We acknowledge the additional assistance of the Society for American Archaeology and of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago in the effort to achieve ratification of the Hague Convention.

###

The Archaeological Institute of America is North America's oldest and largest organization devoted to the world of archaeology, with nearly 250,000 members and subscribers belonging to more than 100 local AIA societies in the United States, Canada, and overseas, united by a shared passion for archaeology and its role in furthering human knowledge.

The Lawyers' Committee for Cultural Heritage Preservation is a nonprofit organization of lawyers, law students and interested members of the public, who have joined together to promote the preservation and protection of cultural heritage resources in the United States and internationally through education and advocacy.

The U.S. Committee of the Blue Shield is a charitable nonprofit organization committed to the protection of cultural property worldwide during armed conflict.

For further information, contact:

Archaeological Institute of America
Brian Rose, President
tel: 215-898-4071
email: roseb@sas.upenn.edu

Lawyers' Committee for Cultural Heritage Preservation
Patty Gerstenblith, President tel: 312-362-6175
email: pgersten@depaul.edu

U.S. Committee of the Blue Shield
Corine Wegener, President:
tel: 612-870-3293
email: cwegener@artsmia.org