

The Secretary-General, Courage, and a Strong Moral Compass: How to Help the United Nations

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How I learned about the contest: I found a website online listing various essay contests, and this one was one of them.

Abstract:

The United Nations is a remarkable organisation. It exists for the noble purpose of preventing war and promoting peace. The Secretary-General, as leader of the Secretariat and public face of the UN, is an important figure in global affairs.

Yet many question the position of the UN and the Secretary-General, who have received an astounding amount of criticism in recent years. Some see the UN as a failure. Others believe it as potential, but that it needs to rediscover its old values if it is to make a difference in the modern world.

This essay discusses these issues, showing the need for the UN, the importance of the Secretary-General, and what attributes the latter needs to be an effective ambassador of the organisation on the world stage. Although it is not comprehensive, this essay does offer insights into the weaknesses of the UN,

whether or not they can be fixed, and why, despite these failures the UN is a noble organisation worthy of the world's support.

Essay:

The United Nations faces many challenges in the twenty-first century. Indeed, this is an understatement. The UN as an organisation is dedicated to achieving peace and fellowship between nations – a truly noble and courageous goal. Yet it is a goal that remains so far away, so unattainable. After all, it has existed since 1945. Its predecessor, the League of Nations, was founded almost a century ago. Yet violence and injustice still haunt the globe, plunging it into strife, festering and multiplying every day.

With this in mind it seems as if the UN, and the LN before it, has failed. After all, what can a single organisation, even an international one, really do to achieve peace when it is apparently not wanted? With so many nations at variance with one another, each with their own agendas, factions, and alliances – how can the UN's pleas for fellowship and cooperation find an audience? Moreover, what can one person, the United Nations Secretary-General, the head of the Secretariat and the public face of the organisation, do for peace? Trygve Lie, the first to hold the post from 1946-1952, experienced first-hand the sheer enormity of the task, declaring it to be "the most impossible job on earth."¹ It is easy to become pessimistic in light of these facts.

In a single essay this topic cannot be solved. Is so massive and so important that it is unlikely a dozen books written by the most distinguished scholars on the planet would be able to come up with an air-tight, workable solution. For this is the way of the world. As former Acting Secretary-General Lord Gladwyn, a key player

¹ Trygve Lie, *In the Cause of Peace: Seven Years with the United Nations* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1954), 417.

in the foundation of the UN, once said: “among men, struggle is inevitable.”² The UN will never resolve all issues and problems of the world for the simple reason that the world is flawed and imperfect. For the same reason it is unlikely the UN will ever overcome all of its own shortcomings. Nonetheless this small essay will tackle these questions, exploring the role of the UN and the Secretary-General, the attributes and qualities the latter needs to do a good job, and attempting to pose solutions to the difficulties facing the organisation.

The position of the UN on the world stage is a vital one, and should not be underestimated. According to Article 1 of the Charter, the UN was founded to “maintain international peace and security,” “to develop friendly relations among nations based on respect,” and “to achieve international co-operation in solving international problems.”³ Conscious of the damage the two World Wars of the twentieth century had inflicted upon humankind, the UN committed itself to “save[ing] succeeding generations from the scourge of war.”⁴ These pledges give the organisation a central place in world affairs as a mediator between nations. The Secretariat, as the permanent fulltime staff of the organisation, occupies a special role in this process, serving as international civil servants.

The Secretary-General, as head of the Secretariat and the public face of the organisation, occupies *the* pivotal role. Officially the Secretary-General is the “chief administrative officer” of the Secretariat.⁵ However, there is much more to the job than mere bureaucracy. Under Article 100, the position carries with it an “exclusively international character,” making the Secretary-General an ideal arbiter

² Brian Urquhart, *A Life in Peace and War* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1987), 92.

³ “Chapter I,” Charter of the United Nations, accessed 02/06/2016.

<http://www.un.org/en/charter-united-nations/index.html>

⁴ “Preamble,” Charter, accessed 02/06/2016.

<http://www.un.org/en/sections/un-charter/preamble/index.html>

⁵ Chapter XV, Charter, accessed 02/25/2016.

<http://www.un.org/en/sections/un-charter/chapter-xv/index.html>

between conflicts.⁶ Article 99 gives the Secretary-General the right to “bring to the attention of the Security Council any matter which in his [or her] opinion may threaten the maintenance of international peace and security” – a significant power.⁷

These responsibilities mean the Secretary-General’s job is a noble one, but also one which is difficult and stressful. Taking the position’s exclusively international character seriously, as well as the UN’s commitment to peace, a key role of the Secretary-General has been as a mediator in the various world conflicts. Indeed, this role is so important it often dominates the agenda. Trygve Lie’s tenure, for instance, witnessed the flaring up of the Israel-Palestine conflict and the Korean War. In the latter an army 900,000 strong was organised under the auspices of the UN to repel the forces of North Korea and China from South Korean territory. The stewardship of Dag Hammarskjold (1953-1961) witnessed civil war in the Congo, the invasion of Hungary by the Soviet Union, and the Suez Crisis. In both the Congo and Egypt peacekeeping forces were dispatched to restore order and prevent the outbreak of full-scale war. When U Thant took over (1961-1971) the UN witnessed the Cuban Missile Crisis, the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Soviet Union, and the Six Day War. Under Kurt Waldheim’s leadership (1972-1981) the UN mediated the outbreak of hostilities in Cyprus and violent conflict in South East Asia. During Javier Perez de Cuellar’s two terms (1981-1991) Argentina and the United Kingdom went to war over the Falklands.

The end of the Cold War did not make the UN’s work any easier. Boutros Boutros-Ghali’s term (1991-1996) witnessed terrifying violence in the Balkans and Rwanda. When Kofi Annan was elected (1997-2006) there were invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq by the United States, as well as conflict in Darfur. Under the leadership of Ban Ki-Moon, who has been Secretary-General since 2007, the conflicts continue. The last few years alone have witnessed political unrest in the Ukraine and

⁶ Ibid., accessed 02/06/2016.

⁷ Ibid.

Crimea, increased tension between North and South Korea, and continued unrest in Darfur. Eclipsing all of these has been the gruelling civil war which has enveloped Syria, costing thousands of lives, displacing millions, and which shows no signs of resolving itself in the immediate future.

Although mediating war is a critical part of the UN agenda it is by no means the only one. Humanitarian causes have also been given prominence with the recognition that poverty lies at the root of many of the world's ills. "During my seven years in United Nations service," Trygve Lie wrote in his autobiography, "I visited as many countries as possible, trying to understand their problems and to assist in working out solutions.... One result of this experience was to strengthen my basic conviction that poverty remains mankind's chief enemy."⁸ He went so far as to declare that in fighting against poverty "the United Nations faced one of its most challenging tasks."⁹ Under Lie's leadership – despite the many other issues requiring his attention – he organised a technical assistance network to in 1949 to aid poorer nations, and also jump-started a foreign aid programme.¹⁰

Although in Lie's case his plans were not as successful as he had hoped, his successors have continued this humanitarian tradition. Kofi Annan, for instance, launched the Millennium Development Goals initiative to promote and coordinate (among other things) the fight against HIV/AIDS as well as providing aid to the poor. In fact, during Annan's tenancy a remarkable 75% of the UN's financial resources went towards these humanitarian efforts.¹¹

⁸ Lie, 142.

⁹ Ibid., 143.

¹⁰ James P. Muldoon Jr, "The House That Trygve Lie Built: Ethical Challenges as the First UN Secretary-General," in *The UN Secretary-General and Moral Authority: Ethics and Religion in International Leadership* ed. Kent J. Kille (Washington, D.C: Georgetown University Press, 2007), 95-97.

¹¹ Courtney B. Smith, "Politics and Values at the United Nations: Kofi Annan's Balancing Act," in *The UN Secretary-General and Moral Authority: Ethics and Religion in International Leadership* ed. Kent J. Kille (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2007), 325.

Moreover, in recent years the issue of the environment has become a prominent concern. Taking Article 1's statement about "achieving international cooperation in solving international problems" seriously, both Annan and Ban have been instrumental in bringing the leaders of the world together to coordinate strategy in tackling the problem. Annan helped barter the Kyoto Protocol in 1997, which the UN website declares: "is seen as an important first step towards a truly global emission reduction regime that will stabilize GHG emissions, and can provide the architecture for the future international agreement on climate change."¹² In 2015 Ban built upon this with the Paris Agreement. Certainly these agreements are not perfect, being won only through substantial frustration, hardship and compromise, but they are milestones nonetheless. Moreover, they are milestones which were achieved, in no small way, by the tireless efforts of Secretaries-General Annan and Ban.

With all this evidence, it is hard to argue that the UN does not do important work. Yet the organisation has received an astounding amount of criticism since its founding over a half-century ago. Often this has been aimed at the Secretariat and the Secretary-General. The international relations expert Thomas G. Weiss, for instance, worries that the Secretariat has become a flabby bureaucracy: "inefficient, politicised, and in desperate need of repair."¹³ He believes the UN has lost its original idealistic flair, with the Secretary-General being more of a secretary than a leader.¹⁴ The scholars Karen A. Mingst and Margaret P. Kairns are also of the opinion that the UN is in drastic need of reform, believing the Secretariat to be too constricted by its member states.¹⁵ Kate Seaman in her book on UN peacekeeping agrees with this sentiment, arguing that the UN has become a "political football" for

¹² "Kyoto Protocol," United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, accessed 02/06/2016, http://unfccc.int/kyoto_protocol/items/2830.php

¹³ Thomas G. Weiss, *What's Wrong with the United Nations and how to Fix it* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), 194.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 107;109.

¹⁵ Karen A. Mingst and Margaret P. Kairns, *The United Nations in the 21st Century*, 4th edition (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2012), 64.

the superpowers of the world to kick around.¹⁶ Some, such as the philosopher Roger Scruton, believe it has failed completely. Citing its inability to prevent war, its corruption, and its outdated ideals, he believes “a strong case could therefore be made for its abolition.”¹⁷

Nor is it only outside observers saying all this, with many in the UN saying similar things. Robert Orr, former Assistant Secretary-General for Policy Coordination and Strategic Planning, laments that “as an actor, there’s so little we can do.”¹⁸ Moreover, he complained, “often the people accusing us [of not doing enough] are the same ones who prevent us from being able to act.” When Mark Malloch Brown, a senior administrator in the organisation, transferred to become Annan’s secretary, he was shocked at what he found. In his own words:

“taking a demotion to come over from UNDP [United Nations Development Programme] to be Kofi Annan’s chief of staff was a much bigger step down than I anticipated...I found when it came to management and budgetary matters, he was less influential than I was.”¹⁹

Later, Brown went so far as to declare that Annan possessed so little influence on the world stage that he was a mere “hostage to intergovernmental warfare.”²⁰

Disturbingly, this powerlessness has been admitted by Secretary-Generals themselves. From the outset Lie realised his office relied on “a moral power, not a physical one, and moral power in this world is not conclusive.”²¹ Waldheim openly

¹⁶ Kate Seaman, *Un-Tied Nations: The United Nations, Peacekeeping and Global Governance* (Fargate: Ashgate, 2014), 183.

¹⁷ Roger Scruton, “The United States, the United Nations, and the Future of the Nation State,” *The Heritage Foundation*. Accessed 02/08/2016. <http://www.heritage.org/research/lecture/the-united-states-the-united-nations-and-the-future-of-the-nation-state>

¹⁸ Weiss, 8.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 196.

²⁰ Mingest and Cairns, 86.

²¹ Weiss, 9.

stated in a press conference that “all I have is moral power, I have nothing behind me....I have not got the power to force anyone to do anything.”²²

There are two broad themes present in these criticisms. The first is that the UN does not have enough power. Most admit it has potential, but argue this potential cannot be realised because of its lack of political clout. Waldheim’s quotation “I have nothing behind me....I have not got the power to force anyone to do anything,” deserves repeating. The second theme leads on from the first because, not having power in its own right, the UN becomes open to manipulation by its member states. During the Cold War both sides tried to manipulate the UN, with the United States of America planting FBI agents in the Secretariat under Lie’s tenure, and the Soviet Union attempting to abolish the Secretary-General position entirely under Hammarskjöld’s. In the post-Cold War era a number of experts believe the USA exerts too much power over the Secretariat, compromising its unbiased nature.²³

This casts a new doubt on the role of the Secretary-General. After all, the founders of the UN tried very hard to make sure this kind of thing would not happen. They believed one of the major problems with the League of Nations was that its own Secretary-General was wholly an administrator, possessing no authority in world affairs. This is why no one took the LN seriously, and why another World War erupted only three decades after its establishment. As Lie wrote in his autobiography about the first Secretary-General of the League of Nations, Sir James Eric Drummond the Earl of Perth: “he did not speak out in public at all. He did not advocate an independent League of Nations policy;... he did not try to influence

²² Kent J. Kille, “Moral Authority and the UN Secretary-General’s Ethical Framework,” in *The UN Secretary-General and Moral Authority: Ethics and Religion in International Leadership* ed. Kent J. Kille (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2007), 9.

²³ See Weiss, 4; Mingst and Kairns, x.

popular feeling one way or another; he did not symbolize the League, for relatively few people had heard much of him.”²⁴

This was the point of Article 99: it was supposed to give the UN Secretaries-General a position their LN predecessors never had. As Lord Perth himself admitted, “the distinction is vital. The Secretary-General of the League could only act through and at the request of a Member of the League; the Secretary-General of the United Nations [with Article 99] can act on his own initiative. In view of this difference... [the positions are] necessarily of a different character.”²⁵ This was why President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the “Father of the United Nations,” envisioned the position as being that of a ‘global moderator.’²⁶ Possessing tangible power and initiative, the UN Secretaries-General would become active, dynamic figures on the international stage, thereby avoiding the weaknesses of the LN.

Unfortunately this has not worked. As both experts and senior UN figures have argued, the Secretary-General remains weak. Rather than acting as a dynamic force, all eight Secretaries-General have emerged battered and bruised from their experiences on the world stage, often at the mercy of the ‘powers that be.’ For instance, former Undersecretary-General Brian Urquhart notes that Lie resigned because he was “out of his depth” in the Cold War era.²⁷ Even Kurt Waldheim, who negotiated the ins and outs of international diplomacy better than most, found himself vetoed by China and unable to run for a third term in 1981.

It is clear a large gap exists between the ideal of the Secretary-General’s role and the reality of it. This begs the question: what *is* the proper role of the Secretary-General on the world stage? What can it do? What *should* it do? This essay fully (and unashamedly) endorses Roosevelt’s notion that the Secretary-General should be a

²⁴ Lie, 41.

²⁵ Stephen M. Schwebel, *The Secretary-General of the United Nations: His Political Powers and Practice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952), 10-11.

²⁶ Lie, 9.

²⁷ Urquhart, 100.

strong, assertive global moderator. While this is often seen as an idealist position it is in a sense profoundly realist one. After all, human beings frequently go to war, the modern world being no exception. With the shocking spectre of industrial, chemical, biological, and nuclear warfare possible today is it not reasonable that there be a place where these conflicts can be mediated, possibly even resolved? As former Acting Secretary-General Lord Gladwyn once remarked,

“Among men, struggle is inevitable... [but] in order that mankind should not destroy itself totally in its struggles, it is essential to have some place...in which reason, or law, can be brought to bear on conflicts, either for preventing them, or for ending them in accordance with certain generally accepted rules. We must not despair if these rules are often violated, or, more frequently ignored, or even if the Super-Powers sometimes fail to make use of the machinery altogether. The great thing is that it should be there. And when the abyss really yawns before them... it is to the United Nations that the nations will turn.”²⁸

These are noble words, as true today as when they were first spoken because they reveal the true value of the UN. No matter how weak or corrupt it is it will always remain significant simply because it exists. The Secretary-General remains useful for the same reason. Lord Gladwyn’s words remind us that the UN and the Secretaries-General are there for a reason.

At the same time it cannot be denied there are problems. Lord Gladwyn himself, it should be remembered, was only Acting Secretary-General for a little over three months before Lie took over. He did not personally have to deal with the shunning of the UN during the Cold War years – or for that matter in the post-Cold War years. How the Secretary-General is supposed to fight for peace and

²⁸ Urquhart, 92.

cooperation between nations when these nations are often apathetic or hostile towards the UN is troubling. As previously stated, searching for a 100% fool-proof solution would be futile. Nonetheless there are ways for the Secretary-General to become more effective, and to fulfil the role of world moderator on the international stage despite the difficult, often constraining, circumstances of the job.

The most obvious way of doing this would be to reform the UN. However, because reform is a sensitive issue this is unlikely to happen in the immediate future. As of now, the Secretary-General is chosen by a vote of the Security Council. Herein lies the root of the criticism of the Secretary-General as weak. Because the Security Council chooses the person it means that whoever is elected will be at the mercy of the SC. Moreover, because the Permanent Five possesses veto power, only 'safe' candidates will be chosen. It is a sad fact that Hammarskjold was not picked because of his remarkable abilities and morals (of which the SC knew nothing), but rather because he was seen as a "cautious, safe, and non-political technocrat... [who] would avoid controversial political actions."²⁹ It surprised them as much as it did everyone else when Hammarskjold revealed his true colours. Needless to say, this preoccupation with picking safe candidates is extremely harmful because it erodes the dignity of the office, and prevents it from working effectively.

The power of veto has also proven itself dangerous and intrusive, allowing the P-5 to intimidate Secretaries-General they dislike or do not agree with. Boutros Boutros-Ghali knows this better than most when he found his re-election vetoed by the USA because the latter saw him as a political threat. While some might try to justify the veto power, it cannot be denied it undermines the ability of the Secretaries-General to do his or her job. It reduces them to the status of 'yes-men,' having to either do what the Great Powers want, or else find alternate employment.

²⁹ Urquhart, 124.

Reform, then, would be helpful. It could come in a number of ways, but all require a change in the selection process. Perhaps it should be the responsibility of the Secretariat to elect someone, or perhaps it should be a vote in the General Assembly. It may even work if the P-5 is expanded to include more nations or if the veto power be increased to two rather than one, ensuring no single nation can intimidate a Secretary-General. Nonetheless this is all hypothetical. Reforming such a large organisation would be both difficult and contentious. At best it can be hoped for, and perhaps advocated, but certainly not relied upon as a means to solve the UN's immediate problems.

Instead, it may be best to focus on how the Secretary-General can operate efficiently without reform of the system. In other words, how can the Secretary-General fulfil his or her role as a global moderator in the here and now? To a significant degree this relies upon the attributes and character of the person holding the position. Altogether there have been eight holders of the office – nine if Lord Gladwyn is included. Some have been more competent than others, and while this can be due to the prevailing political climate, much of it also comes down to individual character. Thus, some key attributes which made an effective Secretary-General will be listed, citing evidence from history.

Two chief attributes a Secretary-General should have is courage and a strong moral compass. These two qualities cannot be emphasised enough. If the Secretary-General is to do any good in the world then the person in the job *must* be a virtuous person. They should be honest. They should know the difference between right and wrong. They should know what justice is, and why it is important to fight for it. He or she should be the embodiment of integrity, a wholesome person, a beacon of light on the international stage.

If this seems far-fetched, readers should remember it has been done before. Dag Hammarskjold is often held to be one of the greatest – if not *the* greatest – leader

of the UN. Initially he was selected as a safe candidate who would not 'rock the boat,' and was little known outside of his own country. When he entered the office, however, he shocked everyone. A strong Christian, Hammarskjold was fervent in his hopes for a more peaceful world, and believed in the UN's capacity to help bring that goal about. As Urquhart recalled in his autobiography, he "was an exceptional man with a strong and independent sense of mission. [His] election gave the United Nations eight years of dynamic, and often visionary, leadership. His advent signalled a turning point in the affairs of the UN."³⁰ It is said that he always carried with him a copy of the Charter, the New Testament and the Psalms to remind him what he was fighting for.³¹

In addition to a strong moral compass Hammarskjold had courage, and it is this combination which made him a strong leader. For not only did he tackle substantial issues head on (such as launching a peacekeeping mission in the Congo) – he challenged the Great Powers themselves. When he heard Lie had bowed to pressure and allowed FBI agents in the Secretariat, he lost no time in throwing them out with the simple declaration: "you can't be here."³² Later, when the Soviet Union denounced him for being too pro-Western and threatened to abolish the position, Hammarskjold stood firm. He did not resign in exasperation like Lie. Instead, he directly challenged the Soviets in the General Assembly, stating:

"I shall remain in my post... in the interests of all those other nations, as long as they wish me to do so.... The representative of the Soviet Union spoke of courage. It is very easy to resign. It is not so easy to

³⁰ Urquhart, 124.

³¹ Alynna J. Lyon, "The UN Charter, the New Testament and Psalms: the Moral Authority of Dag Hammarskjold," in *The UN Secretary-General and Moral Authority: Ethics and Religion in International Leadership* ed. Kent J. Kille (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2007), 120.

³² *Ibid.*, 125.

stay on. It is very easy to bow to the wishes of a Big Power. It is another matter to resist.”³³

Hammaraskjold’s courage paid off, winning him a standing ovation in the General Assembly which lasted “several minutes.” The Soviet Union was humiliated, and Hammaraskjold remained at his post. It is a shame he died so soon after this event. Nonetheless, Hammaraskjold provides a heartening example of a Secretary-General standing up with nothing but bravery, persuasion and a sense of righteousness, and winning over two major superpowers as a result. It shows what a little courage and moral sense can achieve when put to the test.

Indeed, it becomes more astonishing when Hammaraskjold is compared with Waldheim, who is often seen as the worst Secretary-General in the UN’s history. Perhaps this view is uncharitable, but certainly it cannot be denied that Waldheim’s moral compass was skewed. Some argue he never had one. For starters, he was not a reputable man. Nor was he an honest one. During World War Two it has been proven that Waldheim fought in the German army, and was complicit in a number of war crimes in the Balkans in the latter years of the war.³⁴ Although he was never convicted, there is no doubt he was involved. As if this was not bad enough, he systematically lied about it for decades to his co-workers at the Secretariat and to the world at large. As Urquhart, who worked with Waldheim for ten years wrote: “Waldheim, emerging as a living lie, has done immense damage not only to his own country [Austria] but to the United Nations and to those who have devoted, and in some cases sacrificed, their lives for it.”³⁵

A man with a grey zone like this in his past should never have been allowed to become Secretary-General. The fact he lied about it for so long was worse because

³³ Urquhart, 172.

³⁴ Michael T. Kuchinsky, “An Ethical Enigma: Another Look at Kurt Waldheim,” in *The UN Secretary-General and Moral Authority: Ethics and Religion in International Leadership* ed. Kent J. Kille (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2007), 192-195.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 227.

it showed he was willing to discard the truth to suit his own interests. It undermined the moral integrity of the UN. The authors Seymour Maxwell Finger and Arnold A. Saltzman record the consequences of this in their book *Bending With the Winds*. In it they argue that Waldheim had few positive attributes. They see him as an opportunist, who, more than anything, cared more for the trappings of office. They lament his lack of leadership, if indeed “it could be called leadership at all.”³⁶ “He did not,” they concluded, “have the dedication to ideals, principles or moral integrity” needed to be an effective leader of the UN. Urquhart agreed, asserting Waldheim was “an energetic, ambitious mediocrity” who “lacked the qualities of vision, integrity, inspiration, and leadership that the United Nations so desperately needs.”³⁷

What this tells us is that even if it does seem idealistic, a moral compass is a critical attribute of a good Secretary-General. Waldheim’s greatest failure was not only that he gave cause for concern, but that he did not give anyone a cause for hope. He merely trivialised the organisation. This is in contrast to Hammarskjold who was widely respected and loved. As Urquhart said, when Hammarskjold died he left an “aching void.”³⁸ When Waldheim left he was at best a joke; at worst, a disgrace. The UN needs more Hammarskjolds. It may not be able to endure another Waldheim.

In addition to courage and a moral vision, duty is also paramount. An effective Secretary-General should be hardworking, able, and wholly dedicated to the job. He or she must be willing to make difficult decisions, and to put themselves in harm’s way to achieve their goal. It must be accepted that the job, due to its magnitude, necessitates some sacrifices. Of all the Secretary-Generals, none embodied the concept of duty better than U Thant. He guided the UN through some of the most difficult periods of its existence. In 1962 he inserted himself between the

³⁶ Seymour Maxwell Finger and Arnold A. Saltzman, *Bending with the Winds: Kurt Waldheim and the United Nations* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1990), 86.

³⁷ Urquhart, 228.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 175.

two superpowers in the Cuban Missile Crisis, urging them to back down. His tenure also witnessed the upscaling of American involvement in Vietnam, the Six Day War, and the ongoing crisis in the Congo.

Like many Secretaries-General, U Thant sometimes had to make difficult decisions. As a Buddhist these decisions were particularly distressing for him. He realised his absolute pacifism – a central belief in Buddhism – was not an option. He just could not be both a pacifist and the Secretary-General at the same time, since the latter sometimes required the use of force (for example, peacekeepers). Instead of resigning he chose to place his job first and his problematic beliefs second, and proceeded to do what was necessary. He proved his worth early, when Katangan militias launched attacks against UN peacekeepers in the Congo, threatening to plunge the country into civil war. Thant authorised Operation Grand Slam to restore order.³⁹ It was a substantial operation, comprising artillery, tanks, and fighter jets, and although it suffered some setbacks (some bombs went off target, leading to the deaths of a number of non-combatants) it was counted as a success for the organisation, and also for Thant.

The time as Secretary-General also took its toll on U Thant's personal life.⁴⁰ On the one hand, his health deteriorated in office, which scholars have attributed to a combination of stress and overwork. After three years he was hospitalised for peptic gastritis. Later he developed fatigue, haemorrhoids, ulcers, and eventually cancer. Even when sick he always placed his duty before his health, working six days a week, getting more ill as time went on, but still refusing to abandon his post.

In addition, Thant's family situation was deteriorating. His wife did not like living in the US, and wanted to move back to Burma. After ten years she still had not acclimatised to North America. It saddened Thant that he was unable to spend

³⁹ A. Walter Dorn, "U Thant: Buddhism in Action," in *The UN Secretary-General and Moral Authority: Ethics and Religion in International Leadership*, ed. Kent J. Kille (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2007), 176-179.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

enough time with her. It was for these reasons he tried to resign after his first term, only agreeing to serve a second after the member states petitioned him to do so. He flatly refused to serve a third. His dedication was remarkable, as were the sacrifices he made for the job, for although he suffered much he also did good work, and the world is better for it.

Lastly, an active outlook is an important quality a Secretary-General should have. Lord Perth was correct when he cited the main difference between the Secretaries-General of the UN compared to the LN was that the former possessed initiative. They could act independently on the world stage. A good Secretary-General, then, should not be merely reactive, waiting for things to happen and then waiting for permission/confirmation from aides and advisors before getting involved. A good Secretary-General should be active in the affairs of the world, visible while they are doing them, and consciously using their influence to better the world. Once again it is impossible not to make reference to Hammarskjold, a man who had no qualms about utilising the authority of the UN. Both Annan and Ban have also been active characters, with the latter only recently brokering the Paris Agreement at a UN conference in 2015 – a worthy achievement to say the least.

At this point readers may ask about Boutros-Ghali. Was not he an active leader? Did he not pay for this by being vetoed? Boutros-Ghali's situation was lamentable, and certainly not just. It is a strong argument for why reform in the UN is necessary. Yet it does not negate the fact that the Secretary-General should be active. Waldheim is a useful example here. He stayed on for two terms and was tolerated by world powers. Yet he was not an active figure; he did not really care about the Charter. As such, not much got done, and irreparable harm was caused to the office. Boutros-Ghali may have alienated a superpower, but he did not disgrace the office like Waldheim. At most he can be accused of going too far in his vision for the UN, or of using the wrong tactics to achieve his aim.

Ultimately it needs to be remembered that the UN is not perfect. Neither is the world. It should freely be admitted that the position of Secretary-General carries with it significant weaknesses. All those who have held the office know this to be true. Unless the UN is reformed, which seems unlikely in the immediate future, these weaknesses will remain. Nonetheless the UN and the Secretary-General are important. The founders of the UN created the position of Secretary-General to be a mix of administrator, diplomat, and statesman. As exclusively unbiased and international it is a unique position, giving the holder a crucial role in world affairs. At its worst the office can be ineffective and corrupt.

At its best, though, it holds great potential. When the right person inherits it, possessing courage, duty, a strong moral compass, and a passion for action, so much so that they embody the concepts of integrity and justice, then truly great things can happen. The Secretary-General can become Roosevelt's global moderator, mediating between nations; resolving conflicts; coordinating humanitarian aid; encouraging cooperation between nation states. With a competent Secretary-General the UN embodies the best of the human enterprise, showing people an alternative path to that offered by war and violence, and giving hope to the people of the world. Although all the problems will never be solved, and it is easy to become cynical, with the UN it becomes possible to hope, and to believe a better future is possible.

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