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Reflections on a forgotten Secretary-General

Abstract

Extract:

A few months ago, I visited the grave of U Thant in Yangon. The memorial to the fourth Secretary-General is sadly neglected - windblown paper rests on the steps to the mausoleum. Although a fence surrounds the site, a policeman guards the grave - presumably to prevent people from gathering there. When U Thant was buried, the students used the occasion of his funeral to demonstrate against the military regime. Since then, the students have been banished to campuses in the countryside and few people come to visit the grave of perhaps the most undervalued Secretary-General.

Keywords

U Thant, Vietnam, Buddhist, President Kennedy, United Nations

VIEWPOINT:

Reflections on a Forgotten Secretary-General

by Michael Platzer¹

A few months ago, I visited the grave of U Thant in Yangon. The memorial to the fourth Secretary-General is sadly neglected - windblown paper rests on the steps to the mausoleum. Although a fence surrounds the site, a policeman guards the grave—presumably to prevent people from gathering there. When U Thant was buried, the students used the occasion of his funeral to demonstrate against the military regime. Since then, the students have been banished to campuses in the countryside and few people come to visit the grave of perhaps the most undervalued Secretary-General.

As I was hired by U Thant and have served under four Secretary-Generals, I have reflected about whether the United Nations has improved since the sixties. Certainly, the organization is now included in world events much more than when it was pushed to the periphery during U Thant's time at the helm. But lest we forget, U Thant helped mediate the Cuban missile crisis and thus prevent a nuclear war. On his watch, the West Irian problem was settled, a diplomatic solution to the Malaysian-Indonesian dispute over Sarawak and Borneo was found, the partial nuclear test ban treaty was signed, and peace-keeping operations were established in Cyprus and Yemen, and on the Indo-Pakistan border. All during the pushing and shoving period of the Cold War and deep distrust of the UN by both the United States and Soviet Union.

Although he was a Buddhist with deep personal beliefs, U Thant spoke out clearly on the war in Vietnam (which of course angered the Americans), on colonialism (many countries became independent and joined the UN during his stewardship) on apartheid (the Sharpeville Massacre occurred in 1960), on the arms race, and on the unequal distribution of world resources. When one rereads some of his speeches today, they bear an unhappy resemblance of those of Kofi Annan, prodding the developed countries to share the planet's wealth.

U Thant begins his autobiography: "To understand my conception of the role of the Secretary General, the nature of my religious and cultural background must first be understood. . . . As a Buddhist, I was trained to be tolerant of everything except

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intolerance.”² U Thant was a follower of the Theravada form of Buddhism, which stresses equanimity and a “live and let live” philosophy (which, in comparison with other religions, makes Buddhism very tolerant of diversity). The third Secretary-General found confirmation of this philosophy in the UN Charter, which “calls on us to practice tolerance and live together in peace with one another as good neighbors.” A good friend of mine is writing her dissertation on the goals and activities of the United Nations through the matrix of the teachings of Buddha. U Thant wrote that Buddhist meditation has four purposes: *metta* (good will or kindness which must be shown to all, even those never met before), *Karuna* (compassion or charity, particularly to those who are suffering), *mudita* (sympathetic joy or sharing in the happiness of others - pessimism has no place in *Buddha-dhamma*), and *upekka* (equanimity or equilibrium). The Secretary-General, who practiced daily meditation, says that discipline allowed him to achieve the inner peace he needed to deal with the personal attacks against him and the frustrations of the job. Some associates called him the “Bronze Buddha” as his moods were impossible to fathom through his outward composure.

But U Thant admitted he was human and had not reached the stage of *arahant* (one who attains perfect enlightenment); he said “[I cannot] completely control my emotions, but I must say that I am not easily excitable.” U Thant, to the chagrin of all the “Big Four” at one time or another, maintained that the “Secretary-General must be impartial, but not necessarily neutral. In regard to moral issues, the Secretary General cannot, and should not, remain neutral or passive.” He criticized France and the United Kingdom for their conduct of colonial affairs in Algeria and Burma, respectively, the United States for their policy in Southeast Asia, and the Russians for their intervention in Czechoslovakia. His philosophy sounds very much like the recently enunciated “responsibility to protect” policy.

On the other hand, U Thant argued that “in the exercise of the good offices of the Secretary General, the less publicity there is during these efforts, the more successful they are likely to be.” He was, in fact, successful in mediating in conflicts between India and Pakistan in 1965, between Netherlands and Indonesia (West Irian), between the Philippines and Malaysia, between Egypt and Saudi Arabia, between Yemen and Saudi Arabia, between Spain and Equatorial Guinea, Algeria and Morocco, between Rwanda and Burundi, and between Thailand and Cambodia. Some of these efforts were hardly known about. Today, the Secretary-General is under such scrutiny, there is hardly anything he does that is not covered in the press. This, of course, is a mixed blessing as the UN is now permanently in the spotlight and has had to develop a media-conscious strategy.

U Thant wrote that the Secretary-General is the “head of a staff of international civil servants, who are not to be influenced in the performance of their duties by national, ideological, or personal considerations of any kind” and “he is responsible for securing the highest standards of efficiency, competence, and integrity throughout the Secretariat.” These are the same concerns of Kofi Annan. Thirty years and many secretariat restructurings and reforms later, it is not evident that the Secretariat is any more dedicated or effective than that which served under U Thant. In fact, I recall an “esprit de corps” and a greater sense of belonging to a noble organization in those days. Now, there are fiefdoms ruled by egomaniacal Under-Secretary-Generals. In my day, Chiefs of Unit were in charge of their work programmes and of delivering outputs in the

² Thant, *U View from the UN*, London, David & Charles, 1978.

way they saw fit. Media publicity was not important. Cultivating contacts to the Permanent Missions was frowned upon, and there was a pride in being an “international civil servant.”

The more things change the more they remain the same. Some of U Thant’s quotations could have been said by the present Secretary-General: “At the UN we are the regular recipients of an immense flow of criticism and admonition”. . . . “In times of war and of hostilities the first casualty is truth” (said in connection with the American reprisals against North Vietnam). However, one of the most perspicacious observations he made was during a speech at John Hopkins University: “The United States . . . too seems to me a prisoner of her past. She was rudely dragged into the center of the world stage, much against her will, by the unprovoked attack on Pearl Harbor. It seems to me that the fear that such a catastrophic surprise attack will be repeated dominates the thinking in Washington, and a surprise attack is seen in the United States as the supreme risk. This fear stems from the same assumption that history will repeat itself.” He might have been foreseeing 9/11 and all the subsequent U.S. actions.

Presaging the conclusions of the Millennium Project Task Force, U Thant said in 1964: “These areas are in fact not developing enough, they are suffering from . . . acute and persistent underdevelopment”. He enthusiastically welcomed the Development Decade (does anyone remember that?), proposed by President Kennedy in 1961. The prescriptions are identical to those presently proposed for the assistance for Africa - a fair price must be paid for products from the underdeveloped countries (U Thant rejected the term “developing countries”). He was extremely pleased with the establishment of the UN Trade and Development Conference (UNCTAD) but hoped that the reduction of trade barriers would be extended to the poor nations without demanding reciprocal concessions from them. Unfortunately, despite all the multilateral and bilateral aid, the gap between the poorest countries and the standard of living of the developing countries has been widening rather than narrowing (as reported by the Millennium Task Force). U Thant recognized in early sixties that for first time in history, enough food could be produced to feed mankind, but it was not just the moral imperative of the “haves” cutting the “have-nots” in on the pie but also of their self-interest, “I believe that is possible for the advanced countries . . . to contribute to the economic development of the less advanced and in so doing to gain greater prosperity for themselves.”

What is fast disappearing at the United Nations is any personal appreciation of the reasons for the founding of the organization, the tense military (nuclear) and political situation in which the fledgling institution had to operate, and the difficult financial and direct challenges the UN had to confront four decades ago. It is forgotten that the United Nations operation in the Congo (at one time, 20,000 men and women were under the UN flag there) was brought to an “almost bloodless conclusion with the end of the secession in Katanga” (U Thant’s interview with David Sureck). The cease-fire between India and Pakistan over Kashmir in September 1965 was widely heralded as a success for the UN. U Thant personally flew to New Delhi and Rawalpindi to carry out the delicate process of negotiations. Foreshadowing the successful operation in East Timor, West Irian was, in fact, the first territory directly administered by the UN as a temporary executive authority. Another “first” for the UN during U Thant’s term of office was the prelude to the founding of Malaysia and the peaceful resolution of the conflict over North Borneo (Indonesia had threatened occupation by force). In Cyprus, U Thant persisted in negotiations despite the fact that the guarantors, Greece, Turkey, and Great Britain, were unwilling to modify their positions and were at loggerheads with the

Cypriot Government. In Yemen, U Thant managed to get the two warring sides, Saudi Arabia and Yemen, to pay for a sizeable team of UN observers and then wrote in his report in September 1964 that the two countries should settle “their needless and now senseless dispute.”

He used strong direct language on other occasions. It is said that he wrote many of his own speeches. U Thant went on record as saying: “I am averse to totalitarian systems in any shape or form.” Later, he became critical of developments in his own country. Although he stayed in the United States after he retired from the United Nations to write his memoirs, *View from the UN*, U Thant remained closely connected to the land of his birth. He died in 1974, before he was able to complete a second book about his life. I recall the modest ceremony at the United Nations and naming of the small rock in the East River, U Thant Island.

His body was brought back to Burma. However, the military junta refused him a state funeral. His casket was taken to a large race-track in the then Rangoon. Some 10,000 people, mostly students, came to honor this important man of Burma who had found solutions in many parts of the world and to demonstrate against the current regime. The police opened fire on the students, killing hundreds according to some reports. Some 5,000 were arrested and 500 were sentenced to from four to ten years in prison. The government subsequently released some (reimprisoned others for further political actions) and allowed a tomb to be built.

To honor these brave dissidents and the memory of one of the greatest UN Secretary-Generals I have undertaken to gather funds for a permanent wreath to be placed at his tomb “With Deep Respect, From Your Former Colleagues and Admirers.” I hope you will join me in this small but significant initiative.

Michael Platzer
June 2005
Vienna, Austria