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UN INTERVIEW
Brian Urquhart
June 27, 1984
Interviewer: Leon Gordenker

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(U Thant)

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GORDENKER: Today we are going to talk about the Secretary-Generalship of U Thant. It might be a useful way to begin to think a little bit about the differences and similarities of political configurations between the time when U Thant took office and the time when Dag Hammarskjöld took office. A superficial glance at the record leads to the impression that these were quite different political moments, but there must have been some similarities, too, because that is the purpose of institutionalizing international affairs. Do you want to comment on these likenesses and differences?

URQUHART: Yes. I think the similarities are that both took over at a time of disillusion and disarray in the affairs of the Organization, Hammarskjöld in the aftermath of Lie's resignation, the McCarthy business, the Korean war and so on, U Thant in the aftermath of Hammarskjöld's death, the enormous constitutional row over the Congo, which affected not just the whole notion of peacekeeping but the whole constitutional position of the Secretary-General himself - in my view the most serious crisis constitutionally there has ever been in the history of this Organization.

If I may make a general comment about U Thant - I may have said this before - I think he is the most underestimated of all the Secretaries-General. I think it is a very bad reflection, especially on Western journalists and historians, that this is so. I was pleased to see the other day - and I had something to do with it - that for the first time in a popular historical work U Thant's efforts on Viet Nam were mentioned, in Barbara Tuchman's "The March of Folly". So for the first time quite a large number of people will realize that U Thant all on his own actually devised the negotiating method, and got the North Vietnamese and the Viet-Minh to agree to it, which Kissinger used, and got the Nobel Peace Prize for, five years later. It is something that should not be forgotten. He was a very decent, extremely courageous, very straightforward man.

GORDENKER: You have just pointed out, however, one of the big differences in the political setting, because when U Thant took office the United States was already beginning cautiously to get itself involved in the Vietnamese affair. It had already had discussions with the French.

URQUHART: When?

GORDENKER: When U Thant took office in 1962 -

URQUHART: It was already fairly much involved.

GORDENKER: Yes.

URQUHART: In 1961 he took office.

GORDENKER: That was certainly a difference as compared with Hammarskjöld.

URQUHART: You must remember that, Hammarskjöld, too, had burnt his fingers on the South-East Asian problem in a much lesser way over Laos in 1959, and it wasn't a new problem. But I think the forthright way in which U Thant tackled that problem was something he never got any credit for. I think it is a very sad commentary on the sort of "People" magazine approach to history that seems to go on in journalism nowadays. It is something I resent very much, because I had a great affection and respect for U Thant.

I'd just like to tell you one story to give you an example of what I mean. Curiously enough, I had never met U Thant as an Ambassador. I don't know why not, but I hadn't, and when he became the Acting Secretary-General on Hammarskjöld's death, he being one of the two people whom Hammarskjöld had thought of as a successor, the other being Monji Slim of Tunisia, I was then the United Nations representative in Katanga, which was, I suppose, at that time the least enviable job in the entire system. I was succeeding Conor Cruise O'Brien. I had not been there for more than a day before I got kidnapped and very nearly assassinated and extremely badly beaten up, and I hadn't been there for a week before we were engaged in absolutely full-scale hostilities with the Tshombe army, officered by

European mercenaries. It was I, since our communications broke down, who had given the order to open fire. I think I am the only person in the Secretariat who's ever done that.

I confidently expected to be blasted from Headquarters, and was much touched and surprised when what I received instead was the text of a public statement which U Thant had made, saying "I have total confidence in my representatives in Katanga. I absolutely back everything they have done. I think they reacted in exactly the right kind of way. I think they showed extraordinary restraint in not doing so before, and I just want everybody to know not to try to tell me that they are wrong." I got a very considerable kick out of that. We were in a lousy position at that time, and were actually under mortar fire 24 hours a day in our headquarters. It was certainly nice to know that the new Secretary-General was a fairly forthright chap. It's something I always noticed about him - that he was very, very certain in his responses in times of trouble, and very courageous. I think it's something he never got any credit for at all.

GORDENKER: With regard to his courage, certainly he took an open stand against the Viet Nam war. Certainly he was very strong in developing the United Nations role in the Congo as far as he could, including the final order to go ahead and open the lines of communication, as he put it, in Katanga Province. Are there other instances that you remember of this display of courage that you've already referred to?

URQUHART: I would say that perhaps the most remarkable - again, because U Thant for some quixotic reason of the Western media is not a fashionable figure; I don't understand why not, but he isn't, though I think the 1967 war had a lot to do with it - is that he did something in the Cuban missile crisis which was very ^{courageous} remarkable. He was the person who wrote to both Kennedy and Krushchev at a time when people were leaving New York in their thousands, carrying the family Vermeer

under their arms and going to Arizona, and it was quite bad. This was a very grim period, when it seemed perfectly possible we were in for a nuclear exchange.

U Thant first went to Cuba and talked to Castro and then he came back and wrote a letter to Krushchev and Kennedy - I can't quote it exactly, although I had a great deal to do with it - the first paragraph of which said "I am sure that you as the President of the United States (or the Chairman of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union) will not wish to go down in history as being one of the people who blew the world up, and I am sure that you will go along with any measures to avoid being put in that position. I therefore suggest the following steps which need to be taken to get away from this confrontation." Then in the American text there was a suggestion that they call off the naval blockade and quarantine in the Atlantic, which was likely to be the proximate cause of hostilities, and to the Soviet Union that they call off the Atlantic convoys and start dismantling the missile sites, and make a public declaration to this effect.

U Thant was nothing like as simple as he contrived to look, and he sent for Mr. Zorin, a very tough egg who was then the Soviet representative in New York, and presented him with this letter to Krushchev. Mr. Zorin flew into a tremendous passion and rejected it. U Thant then said in his wonderfully quiet Burmese way "I am sorry you have taken this attitude, Mr. Ambassador. I wish just to tell you that having anticipated that, I have also communicated this by other channels direct to Mr. Krushchev." Zorin then got up and left the office and arrived at the elevator. The elevator came up and a young man from the Soviet mission came out with an envelope, and Zorin - it just so happened that someone who speaks Russian was there - said "Where are you going?" and the young man said "I am going to the Secretary-General with Mr. Krushchev's reply", which was affirmative. Zorin left New York that evening. U Thant has never got the smallest credit for that, except in Bobby Kennedy's book. I think you can argue that it was a very important pair

obviously can't take it back." U Thant decided he would go on, and the first thing he said to Nasser was "I can not understand, since you knew I was coming to see you, why you made this announcement, which you know perfectly well is going to bring down an Israeli offensive against you." Nasser said "I was going to do it anyway. It's my policy, and I wanted to do it before you arrived so that I would not appear to have rebuffed you while you were here" - a fairly twisted form of logic, but none the less one can see it.

I just mention this because I think ~~the whole~~ making U Thant the scapegoat in that episode is what did his reputation in, and it is something that I personally bitterly resent to this day. The trouble with U Thant was that he was a very honourable man, and he was not prepared to transfer the responsibility to the Security Council, which he could have done. He didn't do it because he said the Security Council would make an ass of itself, as indeed it did, and he wasn't prepared to precipitate this process. As you can easily see, I feel he is a person who has been very badly done by.

GORDENKER: I think we should push a little farther into that, because that is really a celebrated incident, and you have strong views on that matter. You have direct observation at the time as well. I also recall the time vividly, and I have read about it. I think there are several issues that must be raised about it. One is the use of the Advisory Committee that U Thant had. How was his thinking on that point?

URQUHART: He summoned it immediately.

GORDENKER: Why did he summon it immediately?

URQUHART: Because he had to.

GORDENKER: Why?

URQUHART: Under the agreement which had been made about the presence of UNEF in Sinai ... You see, what people will never understand is that UNEF right

from the start was an extra-constitutional arrangement. Due to the British and French vetoes in the Security Council, UNEF was conceived by the General Assembly and set up by the Secretary-General, and the Security Council had nothing to do with it. We reported every year to the General Assembly on UNEF, which, incidentally, was quite an unpopular body, until we removed it, because everybody ~~was expensive and~~ said it wasn't doing anything. I'll tell you some more about that in a minute. So it wasn't as it would be now if somebody said "You have to remove the force in the Golan Heights". The Secretary-General would immediately go to the Security Council and say "Boys, the Syrians (or the Israelis) say we have to remove this force. What is your decision?" He couldn't do that. It was a purely Secretary-General's responsibility. Hammarskjöld had negotiated the force into Egypt with Nasser, with great difficulty. He ran it, with no supervision from the Security Council, and it was strictly a General Assembly force, which is why both the French and the Russians regarded it as illegal and never paid for it.

The other thing was that to get ~~it~~^{UNEF} in in the first place, Nasser having already been invaded in the last two months by the armies of three other States was pretty leery about having any more foreign troops on Egypt's soil, the good faith agreement which was negotiated put a priority on the primacy of Egyptian sovereignty - that is, that the Egyptians had a perfect right at any time to say they did not wish UNEF to stay on Egyptian soil. Curiously enough, the same right was exercised right at the beginning by the Israelis. Ben Gurion ~~totally refused~~ when UNEF was deployed up to the demarkation line and the border in March 1957, said that on no account would it be stationed on Israeli soil, because that would be a derogation of Israeli sovereignty, and everybody accepted it. When Nasser invoked that principle ten and a half years later every sanctimonious fellow in the Western world said how outrageous it was that we were bowing before the Egyptian dictator. We had already bowed before the Israeli Prime Minister, with no

objection at all on this point ten and a half years before, and you can't have it both ways. Either we were right or we were wrong, but you can't have it both ways.

In any case, UNEF was a one-legged arrangement, and always had been. It had worked extraordinarily well, but it was one-legged, because it was only on one side of the border.

When the Egyptians invoked the agreement and said "We want UNEF out", we first of all said "You're crazy. You must be out of your minds, but if you want that, we have no legal possibility but to accede to it, but we ask you to reconsider it and above all to transmit the proposal in due form, so you would give us a little time." U Thant then summoned the Advisory Committee, in which there was a complete split, because the idea was that the Advisory Committee would decide to call a special session of the General Assembly if necessary. The trouble was that the Advisory Committee was completely split. The Indians and the Yugoslavs, who had the two biggest contingents in UNEF, in fact, the guts of the entire thing, who had already been consulted by Nasser, incidentally, were saying "Of course, we have to leave at once. This is perfectly right and no question. It is a matter of plain and simple legality and faithfulness to agreements." And a very feeble show was being put up by the Canadians and others, saying "It's all very well, but ..." and so on. But they never, never decided to do anything but to agree that there wasn't any course much but to agree. legally They did not even think of calling the Assembly, because they knew damn well that in order to call the Assembly we needed a two thirds vote of the membership, and we wouldn't get it for that issue. ~~They would rule it clean out and say that the Egyptians had a perfect right.~~

At that point U Thant went to Cairo.

GORDENKER: May I interrupt you here? How much contact did U Thant have with the permanent members of the Security Council over this issue in this period?

URQUHART: Let me just finish the story, and then you'll see. We then decided among ourselves - Ralph Bunche, U Thant and I, who were the three people mainly involved - that the best strategy would be, first of all, for U Thant to go to Cairo and try it with Nasser and say "Look, Nasser, you're getting yourself in way over your head. This is going to be a disaster for you. Don't do it", to try to find some formula by which we could gain time to renegotiate the whole basis of UNEF and to state, as we stated publicly right from the beginning, that if UNEF had to be withdrawn it would be withdrawn in an orderly, dignified and deliberate manner, and that, since we had to get shipping and all of that, this would take at least three months, which would have given us time. I maintain that was a smart move. Then U Thant tried out various things on Nasser.

Nasser at that point was in a very defiant mood and said he was going to do it anyway, and he had had enough of being told by the Jordanians and the Syrians that he was hiding behind the skirts of the United Nations, and this was too much. The Israelis had threatened to invade Syria and the Syrians had come to him and said that Egypt was a cowardly nation, and this was too much. U Thant said "Well, you may think that, but the plain fact of the matter is that you're going to get clobbered." Nasser said "Never mind. You'll see it's all right and it's decided anyway" and he certainly had decided it.

When U Thant came back we submitted a report to the Security Council, which we all wrote, in which we said what had happened, stated the legal position and also suggested a number of ways to tide the thing over, one of which was to move UNEF 20 yards to the north and put it on Israeli soil while we were negotiating with the Egyptians. The Israelis turned it down absolutely flat. Another was to appoint a Special Representative to go to all the places where the rumours were - the rumour of the Israeli invasion of Syria, the build-up of Israeli forces on the Syrian border - and to try to verify what the truth was. Actually, there wasn't any truth

in that at all. The Israelis turned it down, and I think they turned it down because they had already decided on a military action. It was a piece of cake; there was no way they could lose. I don't blame them either. They were going to take advantage of a supreme piece of historical foolishness by Nasser and they just were going to do it. They had had it planned for years anyway. They turned that down. Then we also suggested as a third alternative to reinstate the old armistice machinery along the border and the armistice demarcation line in Gaza.

GORDENKER: Going back to the 1948 -

URQUHART: Going back to the pre-1956 arrangement instead of UNEF to maintain an international régime on the border while we were trying to renegotiate UNEF back into place in Egypt. The Israelis turned that down on the grounds that the Egyptians had already abrogated the armistice agreement.

The Council in U Thant's absence had had, ~~I think~~ on the initiative of the Danes and the Canadians, a totally disastrous meeting on this subject, which had simply become a shouting match between the United States and the Soviet Union, with no decision: not helpful. When U Thant came back he was under considerable pressure from a number of people, including, I remember, Lord Caradon, who was nothing if not well-intentioned, to invoke article 99 and say that this was a threat to the peace. It was the only way you could get it before the Council, because otherwise it would have had to go to the Assembly, which wasn't capable of calling itself into session, because we would not have got a majority. U Thant refused to do this, and there is a considerable argument about why. The argument that he certainly made with us, and which we agreed with, was that the Council had already made an ass of itself on this issue in his absence and there was absolutely no point in exposing the Council once again to a super-Power shouting match when there was a very dangerous situation going on; it was better to try to go on negotiating it.

In retrospect, I think this was a colossal error, because if he had done that at least then instead of U Thant ~~begin~~^{being} the scapegoat the good old Security Council and all its graceless members would have been. I can tell you the behaviour of the Canadians, the Americans and the British - under the leadership of the ineffable Brown - was absolutely grotesque. It made one blush for them. It was terrible, because they all went after U Thant, the only person who had (a) been to Cairo and (b) suggested three perfectly good ways of getting out of it. No dice. They all wanted a scapegoat. None of them knew what to do, and so they behaved very badly. But I think it was a great pity ~~personally~~ in retrospect that we didn't invoke article 99 and dump the thing on these people, but we didn't.

GORDENKER: Did U Thant resent these attacks?

URQUHART: As far as he ever resented anything. He made a speech about this - I wrote it - to a group of editors about a year and a half later, and he was very bitter about it. He felt that nobody, for all sorts of narrow reasons, had made the smallest attempt to help him and that then, when his efforts had ground to a halt through lack of support, they had simply in the most shameless way used him as a scapegoat, and some of the phraseology used was fairly insulting, I must say, by people who certainly should have known better. We had a series of very jolly correspondences with some of them afterwards, including Brown, whose position wasn't very strong on this one. But the fact was that U Thant was branded in Western eyes after that as all sorts of undesirable things, and in my experience of 40 years here I think it was the most shameful episode, because I think that if anybody deserved support it was him.

GORDENKER: Still, didn't he buy some of this opposition by making quite sure to present himself as a spokesman, if not for the third world, at least for some of the deeply felt desires of the third world?

URQUHART: I don't think he did that so very much. I think he always regarded the Viet Nam war, for example, as a terrible disaster for everybody, especially the Americans. I think he regarded it, and I think with some reason, as an unconsciously racial war, and if you think about it, it was.

GORDENKER: I agree.

URQUHART: After all, we know that 58,282 Americans were killed. Who has ever bothered to add up even to the nearest 100,000 how many Vietnamese were killed? U Thant as an Asian felt that very strongly and had the guts to point it out, incidentally.

GORDENKER: Yes, he did.

URQUHART: And it did not make him popular, but I think he was right. It was a shameless exercise in power politics by everybody, including the Chinese and the Russians. It was not a happy affair. I think he was a very honourable man, U Thant. He's the only person I know who would go to Moscow and inform the Soviet public over the Moscow radio that the Soviet public had been totally misinformed about the United Nations in the Congo, for example. Actually, they couldn't stop him, because he said it before they had time to hear it. ~~But it wasn't bad.~~ He was very good with de Gaulle. He was very good about Tshombe. He was very straightforward. He was an honest man.

You must remember this was ^{the} period when the third world as such emerged as the third world. It was a very important turning point in the whole history, not just of the United Nations, but of the world. It was a period when ^a ~~the~~ whole new constituency suddenly appeared in public. Was he supposed to ignore that? He never seemed to me to be biased at all. He had, for example, an enormous regard for the British, not least because he had taken part in ~~the whole business of~~ the liberation of Burma. He had a very high regard for the United States. Ironically enough, he had a very regard for Israel, a country which he had visited before he

became Secretary-General. I think it's too easy to say this. It seemed to me that he was a very forthright ^{and honest} man. He was prepared to say what he thought.

GORDENKER: Did he have a political base?

URQUHART: No, not really. I don't think so.

GORDENKER: His two predecessors really did. They had lines into Western Europe and they had access to Governments that were really very -

URQUHART: I am not sure that that is true, as a matter of fact.

Hammarskjöld's political base was the sort of medium, common-sense middle Power's. He was not regarded with any great favour by any of the permanent members of the Council, except when he was safely dead. Lie was greatly suspected at the beginning of being a kind of covert Soviet sympathizer and was totally denounced ^{by the Soviets} at the end for being a running dog of the American imperialists. He didn't have much luck. It all sounds very silly, but it's true.

I don't believe that U Thant was like that. I think U Thant was a naturally wise man, and he was very direct. He was the only person I have ever worked for who never suffered from the slightest desire to blame his subordinates. He always instantly took responsibility for anything that happened, without any question. It would never have occurred to him. If he thought ^{something} it was wrong, he would tell you later "I think perhaps we ought to change it. Maybe it isn't the best way to go about it." But in public, never.

He was not somebody to be dismissed. There is a terrible thing about U Thant. He wrote an autobiography, which was when he was dying, and I must say the first draft was a mess, because he was very ill when he was writing it and also he was no writer. It was rewritten by the chief editor of Doubleday and was published. Curiously enough, although a somewhat simplistic book, it is a very interesting book, because there is a great deal of information in there which isn't to be found anywhere else. It was never reviewed, as far as I know, in the United

States or England. I think there's something rather peculiar about that. What is this? We are talking about U Thant being prejudiced in favour of the third world. How about the first world being prejudiced against a Buddhist, independent fellow? We ~~would~~ need to be very careful about these things. I was shocked by that. I thought it was terrible.

GORDENKER: Do you think that U Thant had an insight into the very large, very powerful Western countries and the Soviet Union that he had to contend with?

URQUHART: I don't think U Thant had a very profound political insight, I must say. I think he was basically a ~~very~~ religious man with a very strong moral sense and a very strong sense of personal obligation. I don't think he was a profound political analyst at all.

GORDENKER: Could he take political advice?

URQUHART: Yes. Well, I always found it so. We always found that he was very open to advice. I went with him on a number of missions, and I must say that he was a marvellous person to work with. If he thought something was good, he would do it. I went with him, for example, during the India-Pakistan war of 1965 to both countries to try to get a cease-fire, which we finally succeeded in doing. I found him extremely open to discussion and advice and so on. I think he was very good.

GORDENKER: It seems to me that you are describing someone who may be guided by a moral sense but who had a good deal of talent for picking the expedient move at the moment to get the proximate goal. Is that fair enough?

URQUHART: I don't know about the word "expedient".

GORDENKER: I don't mean it to be a pejorative word. You can say "efficient" if you wish.

URQUHART: Let's look at his successes. He got us out of the Congo by 1964, which in my view was an absolutely major success. It has to be said that the Congo since under President Mobutu ^(who has taken over since we left) is not exactly what you might call the millennium. In fact, it's a mess. But the fact of the matter is that we were put in there to preserve its territorial integrity and to introduce a Congolese Government, and we did that and got out, and he got us out of it.

He inherited the most appalling mess in this Organization. He inherited a Secretary-Generalship not on speaking terms with two of the five permanent members of the Security Council and an Organization which was totally split along ideological lines on the constitutional issue and on the issue of the Congo and on the whole subject of peace-keeping, which up to that time had been our great innovation and glory. In spite of that, he supervised the setting up of yet another very important peace-keeping mission in 1964, the Cyprus mission. In my view, he played an eminently constructive role in the Cuban missile crisis, which is arguably the most dangerous crisis we have had since World War II, ^{or perhaps ever.} He certainly played a very constructive role, for which he was freely commended, in what was a very dangerous war, which people have now forgotten - the India-Pakistan war of 1965, which at one point was supposed to be dragging in the Soviet Union, China and the United States. It wasn't small stuff. We have talked about 1967. He was extremely active in trying to promote ~~the~~ economic development ~~the~~ (7), which I don't think he fully understood, ^{but} because he was always prepared to take advice on it. He initiated, at a time when nobody wished to think about it, in the first place, an effort to get the Security Council interested in the upcoming war over Bangladesh. We spent six months doing that, getting nothing but rebuffs from the Council, saying "Look. You've really got to get on to this. You've got 10 million refugees in India. You've got a huge sort of subterranean war going on," in what was then East Pakistan. "You've got a huge humanitarian problem due to the

previous famine and drought." He set up at that time a highly controversial operation, which was the relief of East Pakistan, which became Bangladesh, probably the most successful humanitarian operation we have ever done, and at a time when it was violently controversial because anything we put in there was very likely to go to the benefit of the Indian ^{or the Pakistan} army and not of the inhabitants of East Pakistan. So it was a tricky thing to do. So I don't think he's short of positive efforts. I wouldn't say that U Thant was any political genius. I think he was a rather simplistic man. I don't think he had any great, deep powers of political analysis, but I do think he was a decent man and I think he was very courageous.

GORDENKER: Was he as Secretary-General prepared to give a lot of scope to his subordinates?

URQUHART: Yes, I think so.

GORDENKER: Too much?

URQUHART: No. Well, you're asking the wrong person, because I was one of them.

GORDENKER: I was hoping you wanted to do some self-criticism this afternoon.

URQUHART: I always found U Thant a very good person to work for. Provided one repected his authority and consulted him about things, he was extremely helpful and a decent person to work for. ~~As I said before, I think he had a remarkable capacity.~~ We all make mistakes and particularly if you're dealing with rather marginal areas like peace-keeping you tend to make some terrific ones. I must say that I have never known in my whole experience, either military or civilian, someone who as a matter of course completely took it for granted that everything was his responsibility. There was never any question of trying to pass the buck. He was remarkable in that way.

GORDENKER: What did he see as the outcome of the use of armed force to open the lines of communication in Katanga Province?

URQUHART: One day I'm going to write about this and I would have to go back and look up all of the papers. What happened was that we had under Hammarskjöld the first round of fighting in Katanga under the leadership of O'Brien, which I must say was a colossal mess-up, whichever way you look at it, because nobody to this day knows what the hell they thought they were trying to do. I think I know. I think they were trying to do everything and hadn't decided what they really were trying to do. Anyhow, that was a mess. Then they had the second round of fighting, which I was presiding over, which produced, after two and a half weeks of fairly rough action, with a lot of casualties, a stand-off, a reconciliation with Tshombe, which I was responsible for, which resulted in Tshombe agreeing to send Deputies to the Central Parliament in Leopoldville in January 1962, which was the beginning of a very intensive effort under U Thant's direction for a Congolese reconciliation, which we finally got ^{in early 1963} (after a third round of fighting, which, curiously enough, was triggered off by Tshombe himself for reasons which nobody has ever been able to figure out. I think it was Christmas Eve and it was a sort of feu de joie. God alone knows what they were doing. Unfortunately, they happened to hit a lot of our people.

That set off our people in a sweep, which was not ordered from New York, which we actually made some efforts to stop. But it went so quickly and with so few casualties that by the time we got it straightened out that they hadn't been instructed to do it they had taken both Kolwezi and Jadotville and that was the end of Tshombe. Tshombe then did something which I had told him he could do a year before - that if he really handled it right he could become Prime Minister of the whole Congo, which is exactly what he did. He was quite an able performer and had a great deal of charm, though not too much constancy of character, I think. He

became Prime Minister of the Congo. The Congo was then unified. This was all under efforts by U Thant and various people: Bob Gardner ^{of Ghana} (?), Bunche, and a whole series of people who were negotiating all this. We then set about in earnest what was in fact a reconstruction plan of the Congo, which had a certain amount of effect for some time until, unfortunately, Tshombe ~~then~~ began to suffer from the problems that he had inflicted on his predecessors. He had three secessionist movements - a mercenary pincer movement headed by (what was he called?) Black Jack Schramme ^{and "Mad Mike" Hoare, a British mercenary.} (?). It was all James Bond stuff.

~~Tshombe finally went into exile and was succeeded all over again by the ineffable Mobutu, who has been with us up to this time. At that point U Thant, I think very rightly, realizing that we weren't in for any great successes with Mobutu, who didn't like the United Nations anyway, cut his losses and~~ ^{in mid 1964} said "I am now going to take the military peace-keeping operation out of the Congo. It makes no sense to keep 20,000 men there. It's up to the Government. It's a unified Government." Everybody said "Oh dear, dear. That's terrible. Who's going to guard the embassies and so on?" We said "That's tough. There you are. You all felt free over the past four years to criticize every single bloody thing we ever did. Now you're going to have to find out what it's like without the United Nations." And he did it. I think that was an extraordinarily smart move, because otherwise we would be there to this day.

GORDENKER: You would be there to this day carrying out the instructions of the Security Council to train troops.

URQUHART: We would be in a hopeless mess, because there is no way that that would succeed. I think it displayed great common sense. As I say, I don't think U Thant was any kind of deep thinker, and I think he would have been deeply insulted if you had ever told him he was.

GORDENKER: What about his campaign on Viet Nam? Why did he undertake that campaign in such a public manner as he did?

URQUHART: Well, it wasn't very public, you know -

GORDENKER: There was a great speech in Baltimore -

URQUHART: It seems to me that in that he foreshadowed the enormous fuss

there was in this and other countries later. ~~I think~~ U Thant was morally outraged by what was happening in Viet Nam, and I think he was absolutely right. U Thant saw the Viet Nam thing again in very simple terms. He saw it as a proxy battleground of the three greatest countries on earth over the prostrate bodies of three of the smallest, most powerless and most divided countries on earth, and he was horrified. He saw the demise of an ancient civilization in a proxy battle between the United States, the Soviet Union and China, and he thought it was disgusting, and so do I. What's wrong with that? He had no authority to do anything about it, ~~and~~ ^{but} he just wasn't going to sit by and let it go past without having a shot at it, and he got very, very near to doing it, because he got the Viet Minh, he got the North Vietnamese, to agree to a talk about ^{with the US} talks in Rangoon. He even had the room all set up, and he assumed the Americans would be interested in this, as indeed they were five years later, when they had had 50,000 more casualties. Then he put it to Stevenson, who put it to Rusk, and there was no answer for weeks and months. Then he discovered that ^{Resident} Johnson had never been informed of this at all, which I think is one of the most scabrous episodes of the Viet Nam war. It is a most appalling thing.

GORDENKER: How did he discover that?

URQUHART: He discovered it for a very simple reason - that Johnson, who was a great one for surprises, happened to be in New York (I forget why; going to the dentist or something) and suddenly decided he would come and pay a surprise visit on the United Nations. We had all just come back from lunch. The place was

for more details
on U Thant and Vietnam
see my book:
"Ralph Bunche: An
American Life"
(New York, 1993)

in an uproar, because the Secret Service was all over the place turning people out, throwing people out of their offices and that kind of thing. I got a little bit annoyed with that and asked what the hell was going on, and they said "The President of the United States is coming". I remember saying to the Secret Service man who was going through my office "You might have let us know 25 minutes earlier. It would have been nice. Five minutes is not very much."

Sure enough, Johnson turned up and we all went into the conference room and the usual broad jokes about the weather and other topics were exchanged - very boring. Then U Thant said "I'm so glad you've come, Mr. President, because I've been waiting now for ~~seven~~ weeks for an answer to my suggestion about Viet Nam, and the time is getting very late and the other parties are getting very impatient." Johnson said "What proposal?" Then there was a big pause and Dean Rusk began to whisper in his ear, and he had never heard of it. I remember Ralph Bunche, who was not exactly backward in these matters, really got going. He said "I can't understand what this is. It's unbelievable. I never heard anything like it. You mean the President never heard of it?" This was the fate of U Thant's initiative. It is arguably one of the most foolish episodes you can imagine, because as a matter of fact Kissinger ^{used} ~~did~~ precisely the U Thant formula and indeed got the joint Nobel Peace Prize for it in Paris in 1969 - not very good.

GORDENKER: With an interesting partner.

URQUHART: Yes. It is rather sad. Ironically, I felt strongly about it because Hammarskjöld, although the situation in South-East Asia had been on a different basis - then the problem was over the situation in Laos - had tried something very similar. He had tried desperately to put in a substitute for the Great Power proxy confrontation in the three countries of South-East Asia, ^{especially in Laos,} and had been completely written off both by the United States and by the Soviet Union. U Thant tried a different tack in a much worse situation, when the fighting had

already got to a very high pitch. It has never been explained to this day quite what everybody thought was going on, but the lame excuse given was they didn't want to agree to negotiations which they thought might weaken the authority of the Saigon Government, which they subsequently overturned themselves, as a matter of fact. It is not a creditable thing.

GORDENKER: It is really quite interesting to see the distance that was travelled between Hammarskjöld's intervention in the Security Council on the Congo matter and Thant's leaving office, because the United Nations moved in that period from a central institution - quite central institution, not completely central, but a quite central institution in important international politics - to one which was very much pushed aside, and in that period the Secretary-General, you point out, was not considered a very important person, was not given very much credit, and yet during that period the Cuban missile crisis had been influenced by the United Nations, there was an important scheme, if not a successful one, for dealing with the Viet Nam war, the Congo enterprise had been liquidated and a new peace-keeping effort had been started in Cyprus. There is a remarkable disjunction of forces in this. It is hard to see what's going on.

URQUHART: I don't think it's quite true to say that in U Thant's time the United Nations and the Secretary-General were pushed aside. I think, as usual, they were used when everybody got into such a bloody awful mess they didn't know what else to do. But that's always been true. It was true right from the beginning.

I think what is interesting is this. It has always been assumed that Hammarskjöld was the most audacious Secretary-General. Hammarskjöld was a great, *but* very legalistic man. His intervention in the Congo was only done after the most elaborate consultations with the members of the Security Council, only carried out on a decision of the Security Council, to which he constantly referred back until

the thing got so bad that it was transferred under the Uniting for Peace resolution to the General Assembly. He always tried to legitimize his initiatives and his actions, even in his more dashing efforts, like the mission to China over the American prisoners.

U Thant on the Cuban missile crisis and Viet Nam was pretty well operating on his own estimation of his own ultimate responsibility for international peace and security - in fact, Viet Nam entirely, because there was no ^{formal} decision whatsoever about that. It was a purely private initiative, and I maintain that if one is going to judge Secretaries-General by their independent actions, he wins hands down over all the other four - I don't know why nobody has ever noticed this - and, incidentally, on two supremely important matters, and there are others. His efforts I know, because I wrote most of the documents. His efforts, for example, to pre-empt the Bangladesh war, which was a horrible war, ^{clearly discernible} ~~started~~ eight months before the war actually took place, ~~and~~ got absolutely nothing but the most frightful scowls from the members of the Security Council, who didn't want to get involved in something difficult. It's as simple as that. It caused all sorts of conflicting alliances and so on.

I think you could argue that of all the Secretaries-General he was the most audacious. He certainly wasn't as deep a man as Hammarskjöld. I don't think he was so good in execution as Hammarskjöld. He didn't have the same flare for personal diplomacy that Hammarskjöld had. He didn't have Hammarskjöld's unbelievable capacity for attention to detail or for personal leadership in the field. But he did have a very remarkable independent quality of initiative in things which he thought mattered, and I think it's hard to argue that the Viet Nam war and the Cuban missile crisis were not things that were a matter of supreme responsibility.

GORDENKER: Let's turn for a minute to a couple of other aspects of the Secretary-General's office. The Secretary-General is the head of the United Nations Secretariat. He has got administrative responsibilities. In the case of Trygve Lie these responsibilities grew very rapidly and were consciously pushed along. In the case of Hammarskjöld there was an individual with great experience at managing political civil services. Now we have the situation of U Thant, who comes in without this administrative background in a highly articulated government and who has a Secretariat which in many respects was settled as a structure. It had been around for 20 years. People began to understand it. How did he do as an administrator? What were his notions? What were his priorities there, if he had any?

URQUHART: Very few. I hesitate to say it, but I don't think U Thant was an administrator at all. I don't think he was interested in it. He wasn't a bad administrator; he just wasn't an administrator ^{at all}. He left all this mostly to C. V. Narasimhan. I don't think it did the Secretariat any good. I think we got into a very slack period of - I can't remember the word now; what is it? What's the word when you hand out offices?

GORDENKER: Sinecures.

URQUHART: No, no. What is the word?

GORDENKER: Patronage.

URQUHART: That's right.

GORDENKER: That's a great American word.

URQUHART: I don't think it was good at all. I always thought it was terrible. In our office we always resisted having anything to do with it, but I must confess that I think from an administrative point of view the U Thant period was terrible. I think it's important to remember about U Thant, incidentally, that he was elected as Acting Secretary-General. He didn't want the job in the first

place and made it very clear that he was only staying for one term. He fought like hell to leave after one term and was drafted. He was drafted very reluctantly. Why he was so reluctant, I'm not sure. I think it could have been that he was a contemplative man, quite lazy, and didn't like the pressure. I'm not really sure that's the reason. I think he also knew that he was ill, and he was ill for a very large part of his second term with one thing and another.

In fact, we had the most bizarre situation on the 38th floor in the last years of the U Thant régime. I must say it was the most curious period of my life in one way. We had the Secretary-General, who was in and out of hospital the whole time and was not allowed to exert himself, under doctor's orders. We had the ~~first~~ ^{Jose Rols-Bennett,} Under-Secretary-General for Special Political Affairs, ~~dying~~ of a brain tumour. We had Ralph Bunche, the dean of all international civil servants, also dying of a mixture of diabetes, kidney disease and other things, ~~and~~ ^{It} was a fairly weird three or four years, I must say, the load mostly falling on those of us who were actually doing the work and sitting in the chair, and it wasn't easy. I think people sometimes forget quite how difficult that was and how little U Thant had wanted that. His desire to get out was tremendous when he came up for a second term in 1966. I think it's only fair to mention that, because he did not, I think, feel that he was physically up to the job any more and was forced to go on. This really, I think, was a very sad thing for him.

GORDENKER: It certainly is ironic that the Governments that had put him into office in the first place and expected, if my estimate is correct, that he would not be given to initiative very much, had themselves yet again a man who was given to initiative. He took them. He was in controversial situations. He then wanted to leave and they insisted that he stay on.

URQUHART: We are going to have to talk about that some time, too. I have very strong views about the whole way in which Governments conduct the

business of electing Secretaries-General. I think it confers a great injustice on the holders of the office and also on the Organization. I don't think they go about it the right way at all. It is so much a matter of log-rolling on an international scale and so much a matter not of who can do the job and who is the best candidate, but who will make the least waves and be more or less in line with your own national policy. It's a hell of a way to pick someone who is expected when the chips are down to really do something very effective and is ^{blamed} accused if he doesn't.

I must say I think on the whole people have been extremely lucky. I think Trygve was a great deal better than anybody had any reason to expect. I think that Hammarskjöld was quite remarkable. I think U Thant in his own somewhat mysterious way was from a moral point of view an extremely fine Secretary-General, although bad administratively and somewhat lazy in political execution. Waldheim was a tremendous worker, something of a hack, admittedly, but not at all all the things that have been said about him since. The trouble about Waldheim was he never wanted to stop being Secretary-General, and it ruined his reputation. Now we have in Perez de Cuellar somebody who I personally have a tremendous regard for. He didn't want the job. He's a very distinguished, highly intelligent person of impeccable integrity. So, he isn't Napolegn. All right. Who is these days?

GORDENKER: Maybe it's better not to be.

URQUHART: Yes, maybe it's better not. I think we need to talk about that some time also: the nature of this job. A Secretary-General who is a real flyer, a tremendous innovator, a great political risk-taker, is going to last about three months and then his wings are going to be clipped totally, just as Hammarskjöld's ~~or Lie's~~ were. U Thant did one thing which neither of his predecessors managed to do. He managed to survive 10 years without getting cut off by any of the permanent members of the Council, and to this day I don't know why.

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but he managed it. That was quite a remarkable achievement, considering that he was politically rather active and extremely outspoken, that he did it. Maybe it was because he was from the third world, maybe it was because he was a Buddhist. I don't know, but he managed it.

GORDENKER: We have just a few minutes left, and we ought not to pass by a remark that you made along the way, in which you said that U Thant was extremely interested in development affairs but really didn't know very much about them. Could you talk a little more about the way in which his interest came out and the limitations on this interest?

URQUHART: Well, U Thant had been, I think I'm right in saying, in his youth a journalist.

GORDENKER: That's right.

URQUHART: He was not a trained civil servant and he certainly wasn't an economist. ~~He had this rather strange arrangement.~~ This was the period, if you remember, up to 1971, the great kind of blooming of economic development - the Fund for Special Development, what is now called ... What is it called?

Bradford Morse's outfit -

GORDENKER: The United Nations Development Programme.

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URQUHART: It was the beginning of the great period of international conferences on global problems - population, environment, water, you name it. He had this rather curious arrangement whereby his chief assistant, C. V. Narasimhan, was part-time executive assistant to the Secretary-General and part-time joint administrator of the Development Programme with Paul Hoffmann. ~~I must confess that~~ I thought this was an absolutely terrible arrangement because it led, among other things, to a ~~most tremendous amount~~ ^{lot} of patronage and general nonsense, and also it meant really that you had two full-time jobs being done part time, which I didn't think was good enough. C.V. was a ~~quite~~ remarkably able bureaucrat, and so he managed to keep the paper moving in both offices - I've never been able to discover how he did it. I don't think it was at all a good arrangement.

In this way, however, U Thant's interest was very much focused on the development side, ~~and so on~~ I don't think he really understood it, but he was keen that it should be given a lot of attention. And indeed, it was - this was the great heyday of that whole idea. Now, we're all very skeptical about whether we were barking up the right tree about development, and I'm not sure myself. I don't know; I don't know enough about it. But in those days everybody was completely confident it was the right thing to do.

GORDENKER: He got very strong backing in that, of course, from the growing number of less developed countries that wanted assistance. Did that give him any strength in the political field?

URQUHART: No, I don't think any at all.

GORDENKER: Why not?

URQUHART: ~~Well, I don't mean,~~ It seems to me to have strength in the political field you have to do something which is virtually impossible,

which is to be able to force the most powerful countries to work together above a certain line of danger - what we're trying to do now with no success whatsoever. And until we do that, the thing is simply not going to work the way it's supposed to work.

If you have to start dealing with the Lebanon problem by thinking how you're going to avoid a knock-down, drag-out fight between the Soviet Union and the United States, you're not going to do much good to the Lebanese. That's exactly what we have to contend with. If you are trying to find a new approach to the Middle East problem, the Palestine problem, and you are thinking all the time how you get round the East-West struggle, you're not going to have too much time left to do anything useful about the Middle East problem.

If you're trying to solve the Namibian problem and all you ever get to argue about is the presence of the Cubans in Angola, which is the point we've just got to now, then you aren't necessarily going to solve the Namibian problem with any ease. And I don't believe any Secretary-General has ever solved that one. The only time it was almost solved was in the 1973 Middle Eastern war, when Kissinger had the great good sense ^{to realize} ~~seeing~~ that the thing was colossally dangerous from the super-Power point of view. ~~When~~ we had a nuclear alert in the United States and a massive mobilization in the Soviet Union, especially of airborne troops, ^{and} ~~in 1973~~, Kissinger went to Moscow, took the Russians by the hand, and said, "Boys, we will sponsor resolution 338 together in the Council." And what flowed from that was an end to the war, the installation of two extremely effective peace-keeping forces, successive disengagement agreements and, ultimately, Camp David. Not bad. Quite a good run. But that was about the only time in recent years it's happened, and I

don't think that any Secretary-General has a real power base unless he can achieve that, and it's very rare.

GORDENKER: In essence, then, you rather reject Hammarskjold's notion that this is an Organization of the unpowerful Governments?

UROUHART: ~~Well, you know,~~ I'm never quite sure that Hammarskjold really said that.

GORDENKER: He said it.

UROUHART: ~~What he said was~~ ^{When} he said that, ~~but~~ he added, which is always left out: the unpowerful working with the powerful within the framework of the United Nations - a fine Hammarskjoldian concept.

He did not say that it was where the weak shall inherit the earth. I mean, he just didn't mean that, and he knew it. I think he may have thought it - Hammarskjold sometimes is surprisingly naïve, and I think at the beginning it's conceivable he thought that a coalition of the medium Powers was going to be the great catalyst in the world. But I think he rather rapidly abandoned that idea, especially when we got into the Congo and he discovered that he was up against some extremely ~~nasty~~ ^{hostile} customers in the upper division - it seems to me, at any rate.

But I don't personally - and particularly now - believe that any Secretary-General, no matter how audacious, how talented, how much of a world figure in his own right, is really going to be able to get a grip on any problem unless he can persuade the Permanent Members of the ^{Security} Council that there is a level of danger above which they simply have to co-operate, and if they don't, sooner or later something terrible is going to happen. ~~And we just aren't at it. We keep~~ incidentally, ~~It's~~ a concept which we laboriously put

forward on every possible occasion, but it doesn't get many takers in Reagan Washington, I'll tell you that.

GORDENKER: Nor in Thatcher's Britain.

URQUHART: Nor, indeed, in Moscow. We're going to try to push it in Moscow next week. There's no way in which they're going to accept that at the minute. And I think that the world is at great peril as long as that particular trend goes on. And that is the weakness of the Secretary-General.

GORDENKER: I think we promised to get you out of here in about an hour, and it's about an hour, so I'm going to call this one to an end. Our next session really should be on Waldheim, which is another ten years.

URQUHART: Oh, my God!

GORDENKER: We can surely do that.

URQUHART: Well, we can cut this off now.

[End of take]