

## Chapter Three

### U Thant

#### Electing U Thant

By Hammarskjöld's last year, the Secretariat was in crisis. The Soviets and the French had both fallen out with the Secretary-General and had refused to pay their part for the Congo operation. In 1960, at a time when the Secretariat budget was under \$70 million, the Congo operation cost an additional \$66 million over just a six-month period. In 1961 the cost was another \$120 million. The organization was plunged into financial turmoil.

After Hammarskjöld died, the Soviets, determined to undercut the authority of any future Secretary-General, continued to propose the "troika" formula and variations of it. Burmese Permanent Representative U Thant attacked the idea, arguing it was devised to weaken the UN. The Soviets then began to look around for a suitable single candidate and first approached Frederick Boland of Ireland who said no: "I have had a full year as President of the Assembly and that is more than I can take."<sup>42</sup> But Boland thought of Thant and took the unsuspecting Burmese ambassador with him to see visiting Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko. Gromyko stated clearly the Soviets would not insist on the troika if the Secretary-General was from a non-Western country.

Thant had been identified by Hammarskjöld as one of two desired successors. He soon became the leading candidate for the post, supported by Gideon Rafael of Israel, Omar Loufti of Egypt

and Adnan Pachachi of Iraq. The latter two were key to securing Arab support, as some were suspicious of Burma's close ties with Israel. His appointment reflected non-aligned Burma's good standing with both the US and USSR (though Thant was willing to criticize both) and his own standing as one of the more competent Permanent Representatives at the UN. He had worked patiently and discreetly as the chairman of the Afro-Asian committee on Algerian independence, backed the UN resolution condemning the suppression of the Hungarian uprising and was expected to oppose Soviet attempts to dilute the office, but at the same time to be more cautious than Hammarskjöld.<sup>43</sup>

Thant had joined the Burmese civil service at Burma's independence from Britain in 1948 and had served for many years as permanent secretary in the Prime Minister's Office, becoming increasingly drawn to foreign policy issues and traveling widely with then Prime Minister U Nu. In 1955 he helped organize and acted as secretary to the Asian-African conference at Bandung,



Thant greeted by President John Kennedy, Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Ambassador Adlai Stevenson at the White House, 1962.

which would soon give rise to the Non-Aligned Movement. A journalist and school headmaster in his early years, he had been Burma's ambassador to the UN since 1957. In November 1961, with the unanimous backing of the Security Council, he was elected unopposed by the General Assembly as Acting Secretary-General. He was fifty-two years old.

### **The Acting Secretary-General and the Question of Senior Appointments**

Thant's appointment was surrounded by many and varied demands by East and West for top jobs in the Secretariat, as member states woke up to its political importance. Having suspended their insistence on a troika, the Soviets were now demanding a college of senior officials, representing the different international "blocs" and their demands were met with counter-demands. Under a protracted "numbers game" various permutations for "advisor" level appointments were debated. The Soviets wanted the numbers and even the names to be agreed to in the Security Council. Thant was adamant he would not receive dictation from any government; for example, when the French pushed de Seynes as *Chef de Cabinet*, he told them they were free to veto his own appointment. After long deliberations, the Soviets dropped their demands and it was agreed Thant could make his own senior appointments following "consultations" with all.

In his acceptance speech, Thant stated an intention to invite a limited number of persons to be his "principal advisers" at the level of Under-Secretary. He named only the American Ralph Bunche and Soviet Georgi Petrovitch Arkadev, but in late December announced the full list of eight, also representing Brazil, Czechoslovakia, France, India, Nigeria and the United Arab Republic. The "principal advisers" met every month or so, with minutes circulated only to the group. But this was a sop to political pressures and within a year, he quietly let the practice die a natural death.

In practice, Thant (as "acting SG") made very few changes to the upper echelon of the Secretariat, preserving Hammarskjöld's preference to retain authority in his own office. Just before he died,

Hammarskjöld had appointed as his new *Chef de Cabinet* Chakravarthi V. Narasimhan, a former Indian Civil Service officer and then head of ECAFE (the Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East and forerunner to ESCAP). Thant came to rely heavily on Narasimhan on all non-political matters. Ramses Nassif of Egypt was brought on as his press officer.

On the political side, there were two Under-Secretaries for Special Political Affairs. One was Ralph Bunche, on whom Thant would depend greatly, and the other Jose Rolz-Bennet, a lawyer and formerly Guatemala's Permanent Representative to the UN. Throughout this time, the office itself remained incredibly small, with Brian Urquhart as Director. Yasushi Akashi, the future Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) in Cambodia and the former Yugoslavia was then a junior officer in the Secretary-General's office. Thant also increased headquarters civilian capacity for the Congo mission and recruited the Congo military adviser (Major-General Indarjit Rikhye) as "Military Adviser to the Secretary-General." With Thant's encouragement, Rikhye would go on to be the first President of the International Peace Academy.

## **The Financial Crisis**

Thant was immediately confronted by the financial crisis that threatened to undermine the UN and its peacekeeping efforts. He made the crisis his first order of business, initially suggesting the idea of a lottery, which met with little support and recruiting Eugene Black of the World Bank as a financial consultant. He then decided to seek the General Assembly's approval for a special bond issue amounting to \$200 million, holding a series of marathon meetings with each member state delegation over a few days, leading to Assembly approval in December 1961. It then fell to Thant to sell the bonds, which he succeeded in doing up to the level of \$154.7 million. But some countries, reluctant to pay for the bond service, simply withheld pro-rated sums from their regular budget assessments.

The USSR and France remained intransigent and by 1964, voices within the US Congress were calling for the application of

article 19, under which a member state owing more than its previous two years contributions could be stripped of its General Assembly vote. A crisis was averted by an agreement to avoid voting at all during that session of the Assembly, and later by a further agreement that peacekeeping arrears would not count against overall arrears for the purpose of article 19.<sup>44</sup> In a way it was the US which backed down, retaining for later the option that they too could withhold their dues. The article 19 issue highlighted the political nature of the problem; indeed a popular quip at the time said that “never in the course of human conflict have so many spoken so much about so little money.”<sup>45</sup> Some felt that Thant had failed to address the politics, instead treating the problem in a technical fashion.

Meanwhile, the General Assembly established both a working group in 1961 and a committee of experts in 1965 to assess the systems of finance and budgeting in the UN. The first requested an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice (ICJ) as to whether non-payment of peacekeeping dues was illegal and was told that peacekeeping expenses should be treated in the same way as other “expenses of the Organization.”<sup>46</sup> The second concluded that the budget structure allowed too much latitude to the UN’s organs and launched an effort to develop a more integrated system for planning and budgeting, which was approved by the General Assembly in 1967.<sup>47</sup> In 1965, limited financial security was created through the establishment of a Special Account to act as a reserve fund.

The committee of experts also suggested the creation of a Joint Inspection Unit (JIU), an external control body with system-wide oversight and a focus on value for money rather than classical auditing.<sup>48</sup> First established in 1968, it became a permanent part of the UN system in 1976, as a subsidiary organ of the General Assembly and the legislative bodies of other organizations that adopted its statute.<sup>49</sup> Composed of eleven regionally balanced inspectors, the JIU was made accountable to the membership and not the Secretary-General. It has generally been unpopular, criticized for the quality of its inspectors and relevance of its reports.<sup>50</sup>

In November 1962, Thant was unanimously elected as Secretary-General proper after the Soviets dropped their objections. He had personally met Khrushchev and his handling of the Cuban Missile Crisis had led the Soviet leader to reflect that he was probably the best Secretary-General Moscow was likely to get.<sup>51</sup> The Americans were still enthusiastic. His office was given its first budgetary overhaul since 1946 and Thant himself received a \$10,000 pay raise to \$70,000 a year.<sup>52</sup> But crises over the UN budget were a constant theme of Thant's tenure; by the end he would lament that after more than ten years of deficit financing, the UN was essentially bankrupt.<sup>53</sup>

### **Thant and Development Challenges**

Thant was the very first non-Western head of an international organization and was eager to champion a new development agenda (there is some dispute over whether he or Hammarskjöld coined the terms “Third World” and “developing world” – it seems Hammarskjöld came up with the terms but Thant first used them publicly). It was during his tenure that a huge expansion of the UN's bureaucracy on development and economic and social issues began. This was in an era before much criticism of wasteful or ineffective spending on aid, and there was little resistance to bureaucratic expansion per se. In fact, it was President Kennedy, speaking to the General Assembly in 1961, who drew attention to the income gap between rich and poor countries and called for a “development decade,” leading it to endorse a concerted program for economic and social development. At a time when the Secretariat was fairly constrained on traditional security issues, the development agenda gave the Secretary-General a continued high profile role and a constituency base from which to deal with both the Americans and the Soviets.

The economic and social parts of the UN system – including the Secretariat but also agencies such as ILO – were seen at the time as a strong intellectual center of the global development agenda, often demonstrating fresh thinking on development issues. The UN was important in the emergence and standardization of certain concepts (such as the GNP) and in the use and promotion

of good statistical methods. However, with Cold War suspicions in full flight, the UN was constrained from addressing broad macroeconomic questions. In addition, the World Bank already had a certain comparative advantage, particularly for the provision of finance to developing countries, cemented by its creation of the International Development Association (IDA) in 1960.

The comparative advantage of the UN was therefore in technical assistance; the transfer of knowledge and technology to developing countries, fulfilling their need for neutral experts on very practical matters. The preoccupation of the General Assembly with development was reflected in the creation of the UN Special Fund in 1959, headed first by Paul Hoffinan, and in 1965, the establishment of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), which combined the functions of the Special Fund and EPTA, retaining the emphasis on technical and pre-investment assistance. Over time, its representatives would become coordinators for the UN in the field (later “Resident Coordinators”).<sup>54</sup>

A number of other agencies, funds, programs and conferences were also created in the 1960s and early 1970s, such as WFP (1963), UNCTAD (1964), UNITAR (1965), UNFPA (1969), UNEP (1972), and IFAD (1974). UNCTAD (the UN Conference on Trade and Development) marked a high-point of developing country influence and for a decade was a major “hub” for UN intellectual activity on economic and social issues. It had its own secretariat and Thant appointed Raúl Prebisch, a passionate believer in the “import-substitution” ideas fashionable at the time, as its first head. Over time, some would argue that UNCTAD – and by association its Secretariat, which was seen as an important driving force – was innovative, for example emphasizing poverty reduction well before it was embraced by the World Bank after the period of structural adjustment in the 1980s. But some developed countries found it confrontational and ideological and campaigned (unsuccessfully) to have it transformed into a specialized agency from which they could opt out.<sup>55</sup>

As the number of funds and programs mushroomed, the lack of cross-system coordination was increasingly obvious. In 1969, a UNDP report (the “Capacity Review”) written by Robert

Jackson with the assistance of Margaret Anstee made a scathing attack on the fractured and ill-disciplined nature of the UN system, describing it as a “prehistoric monster.” In particular, Jackson honed in on the absence of any central “brain” or “analysis capacity” at the center of the system which could direct and guide its multiple parts.<sup>56</sup> He warned that if the UN’s record did not improve, its comparative advantage in development would soon be lost altogether, probably to the World Bank. Yet to his disappointment, there was resistance to change from both the bureaucracy and member state sources.

### **Thant as Peacekeeper and Mediator**

*The United Nations cannot permanently protect the Congo or any other country from the internal tensions and disturbances created by its own organic growth toward unity and nationhood.*<sup>57</sup>

- U Thant

Thant’s initial political challenge was in the Congo, where in December 1961 he authorized Operation Grand Slam, a large scale military operation which effectively ended the Katanga secession. In 1962 he was praised for his role in diffusing the Cuban Missile Crisis, adding greatly to his prestige and facilitating his 1962 appointment.<sup>58</sup> He was also involved in mediation in the India-Pakistan war of 1965 and in lesser known yet successful roles in Yemen, Bahrain, and elsewhere.

Thant’s attempts to broker talks between Hanoi and Washington in 1965 and 1966 came to nothing, and his early public criticisms of the war in Vietnam, a crisis that worried him immensely, led to US opprobrium. His handling of the withdrawal of UNEF in 1967 was heavily criticized and together with the split over Vietnam and the new Third World majority in the General Assembly, helped drive the Secretariat and Washington further apart. Yet, by associating himself with the interests of the Third World and by speaking out openly against the Vietnam War at a time when peace movements throughout the West were gaining



steam, he was able to find a public niche for the Secretary-Generalship during a period of protracted Security Council deadlock.

Perhaps even more than Hammarskjöld, but building on the latter's "Peking Formula," Thant carved out a role for the Secretary-General as mediator independent of the Security Council or General Assembly. In Yemen for example, he not only forged a peace agreement, but even deployed a peacekeeping operation (borrowing troops from UNEF), gaining Council authorization only afterwards. Reflecting on his good offices role, he later wrote in his memoirs that there were occasions "when the Secretary-General could act without the guidance of the principal deliberative organs." He described the role as a "moderator," a term previously coined by President Roosevelt.<sup>59</sup>

### **The Reappointment of U Thant**

As the end of his first proper term approached in 1966, U Thant said that he was not interested in reappointment. But as the deadline came closer, he hinted that he would accept a second term (perhaps of less than five years) but only on certain conditions. His position was left vague, even to his closest advisors.

Earlier, the Soviets told Thant that the terms for their support for a second term would include diluting the powers of C.V. Narasimhan (who was then Under-Secretary for General Assembly Affairs and *Chef de Cabinet*) and the creation of an advisory board to counsel the Secretary-General, which would include Bunche, Rolz-Bennett, and Narasimhan (his three most senior advisors) but also Aleksey Nestorenko, the Soviet Under-Secretary for Political and Security Council Affairs whom they complained was never brought to the 38th floor. Ideally, they also wanted the retirement of Bunche and Paul Hoffman (at the UN Special Fund) and for more senior positions for the Socialist bloc. Thant told the Soviets that if they had a better candidate for the Secretary-General position, they should propose him. At the time Robert Gardiner of Ghana, Kurt Waldheim of Austria, Max Jacobson of Finland and Sadruddin Aga Khan of Iran were all mooted as possible successors.

Thant seemed to want to stay, but also to find a way of doing

this which strengthened rather than weakened his office. By remaining enigmatic to the very end about his willingness to accept a second term, he seemed to have received what he wanted: full control over his senior appointments, an uncontested reappointment, an interim statement by the Security Council reaffirming their faith in him and a statement by the President of the General Assembly acknowledging the responsibility of the membership to resolve major issues such as the financial crisis.<sup>60</sup> Although the USSR was lukewarm, they could not decide on a different candidate and did not want a fight over the issue. In October, the Security Council approved Thant's reappointment in "the higher interests of the Organization."<sup>61</sup>

By this time Ralph Bunche wanted to retire from the UN, in part to devote himself more fully to the civil rights struggle at home (he had been a tireless civil rights advocate his entire adult life). But Thant pressured him to stay, saying he would himself leave if Bunche did, a sign of the extent to which Thant had come to depend on Bunche's judgment and immense capability.



Thant with Ralph Bunche, 1965

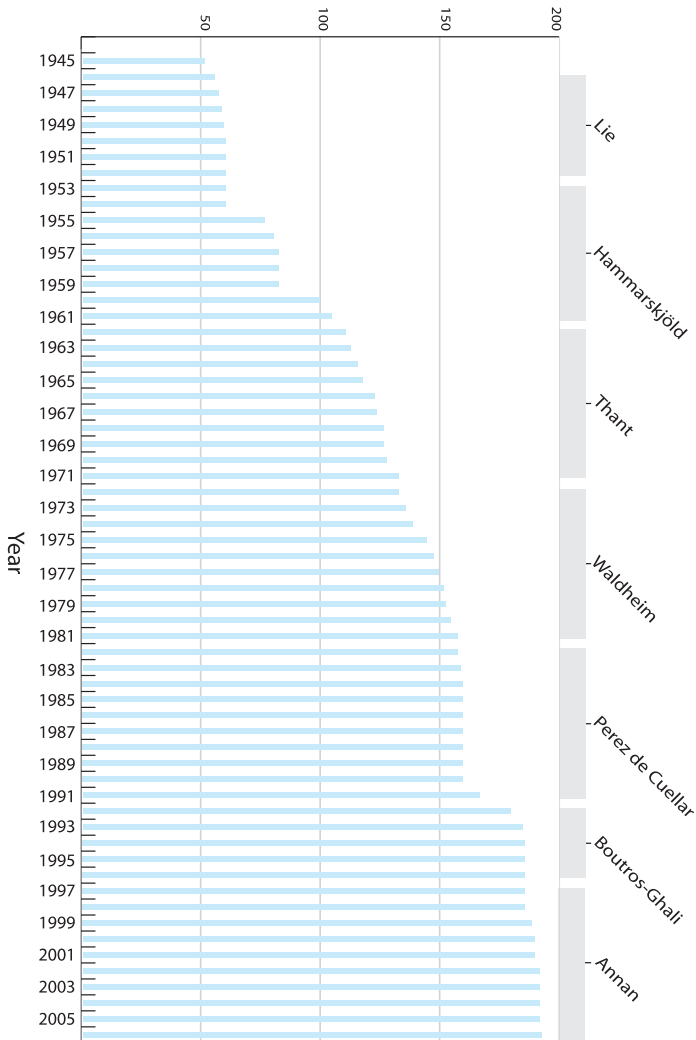
## **The New General Assembly Majority and the Challenge of Finding (and Keeping) Good Staff**

Thant took office at the beginning of a sea-change in the UN's membership, with dozens of newly decolonized Asian and African countries swelling the ranks of the General Assembly. Until the early 1960s, the United States and its Latin American allies enjoyed a majority in the Assembly and thus controlled the Secretariat's budget. Now, there was a "non-aligned" majority and from the beginning, Thant came under pressure from these new member states to make the Secretariat more representative. By the time he left, the Secretariat was indeed much less Western in composition, but the absence of a proper personnel strategy and supporting mechanisms meant that the incoming staff were of an accidental quality, some excellent and others below standard. An opportunity to fix the geographic balance while increasing quality across the board was missed.

In 1962, there were approximately 1,500 professional posts and the Soviets were well below the range of 170-220 to which they were entitled. Moscow gave Thant lists of eighty positions it wanted for Soviet citizens and seventy serving officials for whom it sought promotions. The Soviets also proposed the placement of all staff on short-term contracts.<sup>62</sup> A General Assembly resolution called on Thant to press for a more equitable distribution of staff, but the Soviet bloc abstained, saying it did not go far enough.<sup>63</sup> In the face of such pressures, Thant declared that the administrative and financial integrity of the UN "must be zealously maintained." He assured staff that any change would be achieved through attrition and he would not allow the interests of the career service to be undermined.<sup>64</sup>

Yet the make-up of the staff did indeed change quickly and the early 1960s saw in particular a significant increase in the proportion of African staff (partly the result of a 1965 mission to stimulate African applications). From 1963 to 1966 alone there was a fifty percent increase to 125 African staff, 23 in senior positions.<sup>65</sup> Faced with this influx, long-term employees felt insecure. Particularly grating for some was the appointment of less experienced or seemingly more junior recruits at higher positions. There was an

### Number of UN Members



The Growth of the UN Membership

(often misjudged) perception that the geographical diversity of the UN was undermining the overall quality, as – it was argued – the educational levels of the new staff from Africa, Asia, and Latin America were not equivalent to those from Western Europe and North America. Meanwhile, the total number of staff was growing rapidly, and was over 8,000 by the end of the 1960s.

The challenge was clear. Many of the career UN old hands – overwhelmingly Western – were retiring and these needed to be replaced with a more geographically balanced cadre, but one of equal if not better quality. From the 38th floor, where Narasimhan had a *carte blanche* in administrative affairs, no solution emerged for a system to identify, encourage, recruit, and train the best candidates from around the world, only a good deal of horse trading and attempts to balance member state pressures.

An additional problem that many saw was the Secretariat's relatively low salaries and limited career prospects.<sup>66</sup> For example, a junior economist joining the UN in the 1960s was paid approximately \$8,000 a year, about half of what he (rarely she) would be paid at the Secretariat of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and significantly under the average professional salary in New York City of around \$13,000.<sup>67</sup> Clerical staff received only about \$5,000, a fairly modest sum even for the time.

In December 1968 a study requested by the General Assembly urged the UN to take steps to obtain qualified staff members and not allow standards to deteriorate. A panel of seven experts, under Narasimham, asserted that the Secretariat faced “serious problems in finding qualified officials” and recommended a long-term recruitment plan be carried out as a matter of priority.<sup>68</sup> There were then 7,300 staff members including 2,500 professionals. The “seven wise men” suggested a talent search on university campuses to find gifted young people, on-the-job training and mid-career refresher courses (with training programs outsourced to universities and foundations), job rotation and controversially, regular changes at the top-level. These were good suggestions, but they apparently never got off the ground.

Meanwhile, the influx of new staff also brought about a partic-

ular mix that still defines the political culture of the Secretariat today. The older careerists in the Secretariat, for the most part liberal or left-leaning Americans, Canadians and Western Europeans, were now joined by men (rarely women) from the developing world, generally from the new political class in those countries, producing the range of social democratic, statist, and Third World nationalist and anti-colonialist sympathies which to some extent predominate to this day.

Staff from communist countries were however in a very small minority and remained generally at the margins of the Secretariat. This was partly because of their low number, and partly because they were seen as agents of Moscow. It was alleged that Soviets in the Secretariat were frequently bypassed, or snowed under with pointless work that kept them apart from meaningful information and decision-making. Georgy Arkadiev, Under-Secretary for Political and Security Affairs, had had regular skirmishes with Hammarskjöld over this issue, but Thant discontinued his services after he was seen openly sending notes of guidance to the Soviet ambassador in the Security Council.

The 1960s was the beginning of increasingly negative, though sometimes exaggerated, portrayals of the Secretariat. For example, in his memoirs of his time at the UN, one Under-Secretary from the 1960s (the Brazilian Taveres De Sá) described the Secretariat as driven by cliques, constrained by bureaucratic time-wasting and obstructiveness and primarily engaged in “pointless” memowriting. He accused some of the upper echelons of being primarily interested in their own power and privileges and described the typical staffer as lazy, corrupt, and self-indulged, with a “problem for every solution.”<sup>69</sup> In July 1963, there were even allegations of a call-girl ring operating in the building. Thant denied the claims in relation to the Secretariat, but said he could not speak for member state delegations.<sup>70</sup>

## **Another Restructuring**

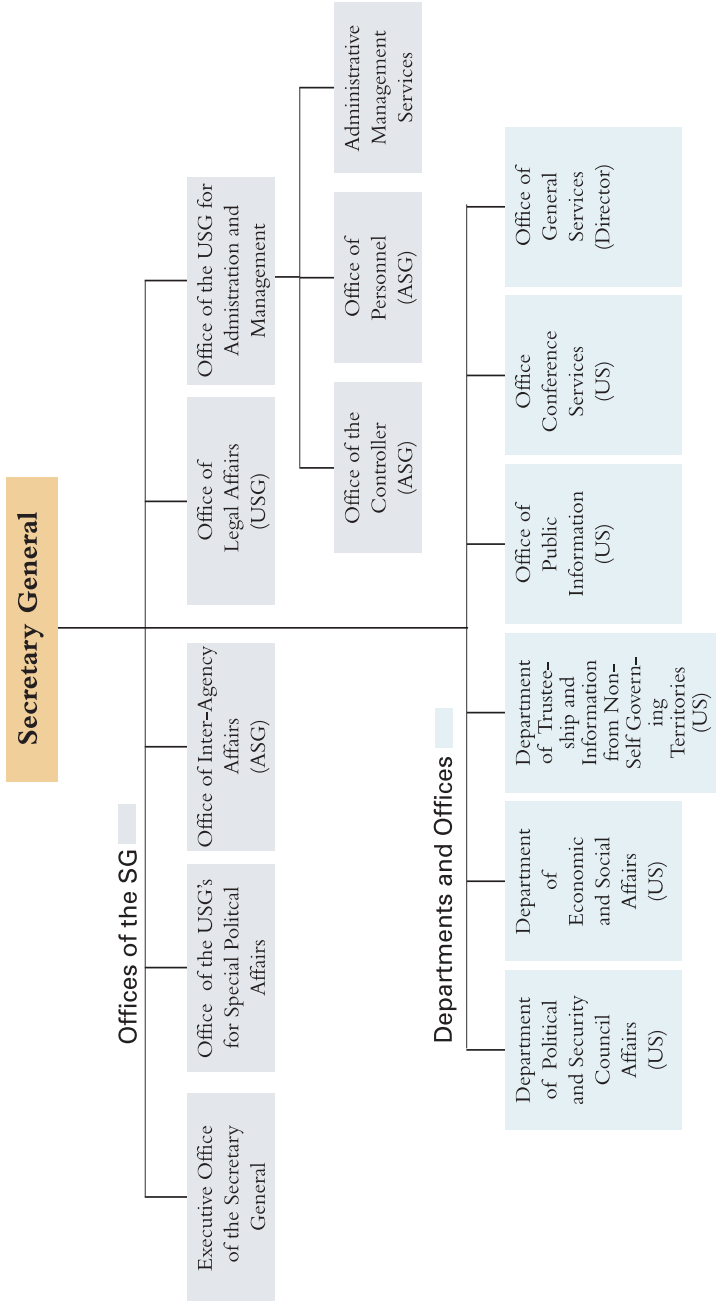
By the late 1960s, the growth of Secretariat staff and functions had made the upper echelon unwieldy. The original model of eight Assistant Secretaries-General reporting to the Secretary-General

had now ballooned into thirty-four senior staff including fourteen Under-Secretaries in New York, five heading up the regional commissions and fifteen others at the helm of other offices. Following a review in 1967, Thant proposed a reduction in top posts through the creation of two levels – Under Secretaries-General (USGs) and Assistant Secretaries-General (ASGs) – with proper geographical distribution at both.<sup>71</sup> Eleven USGs would report to him and would be expected to maintain, in addition to their line functions, an overview of the UN's activities more generally. The ASGs would have departmental, but no system-wide responsibilities. Thant also asked for a raise for his senior staff to \$33,500. Less interested than Hammarskjöld in administrative matters and with no desire to deal with these issues directly through the 38th floor, he combined the duties of Director of Personnel and Controller into a single USG in charge of finance and administration. Bruce Turner of New Zealand, a career UN official, was appointed to the new post.

In contrast to the membership's close scrutiny of other administrative questions, the ACABQ refrained from commenting on the proposals. One member said that the Secretary-General had the right to make such changes and this seemed to be the feeling all around. The General Assembly approved them without opposition.<sup>72</sup> The new system reversed Hammarskjöld's reorganization of 1955, though Hammarskjöld himself had suggested the idea of two categories in the year before his death. The system was used to differentiate the seniority of former Under-Secretaries rather than to create a new tier within departments; the only department that had both a USG and an ASG was Economic and Social Affairs. In the Department of Political and Security Council Affairs, there remained a Soviet head, now called a "USG" (Alexie Nesterenko) and an American "Director" of Political Affairs.

*I don't like to be disturbed at home; I tell the cable office  
not to call me before 6:30 AM, unless there's a war.<sup>73</sup>*

- U Thant



The Secretariat by 1971, reflecting Thant's structural changes



## The Secretary-Generalship in the 1960s

Thant was the first Secretary-General to take over the Secretariat after the West had lost its majority in the General Assembly and was thus becoming increasingly skeptical of the organization. The Soviets were already deeply skeptical, having fallen out with both of Thant's predecessors, forcing Lie to resign and ceasing to recognize Hammarskjöld. Thant's tenure represented a turn by the Secretariat towards the Third World – the newly decolonized majority in the General Assembly – and an attempt to find a tenable position between the West and the Soviet bloc, in part through a more visible association with the Third World's development and related concerns.

By Thant's reappointment in 1966, the idea of the troika was dead. The office of Secretary-General was also increasingly treated with the sort of pomp never before given to the head of an international organization. For example, in 1962, President Ben Bella and his entire cabinet met Thant on his arrival at Algiers, together with a 21-gun salute, in part as a show of thanks for his efforts towards Algerian independence. In 1964 Thant was accorded the equivalent of a state visit to Washington by Lyndon



U Thant with Bertrand Russell in London

Johnson, complete with a Marine honor guard and a lavish dinner. Many of the icons of the 1960s made their way to the 38th floor, from Neil Armstrong to Muhammed Ali to John Lennon. In comparison with later decades though, there was also still a great deal of informality. Thant traveled much less than his successors but when he did it was normally with just a single security officer (Donald Thomas) his press officer Ramses Nassif and perhaps one other aide.

For the Secretariat, the 1960s was a time of both bureaucratic expansion and increased external criticism of performance and quality, as well as a feeling that senior officials, including both Thant and Narasimhan, were unable or unwilling to tackle the hard management issues which were beginning to debilitate the bureaucracy. By 1971 there was a wide consensus among delegates that the Secretariat was “badly in need of a shake-up.”<sup>74</sup>