

The 40th anniversary of the Dag Hammarskjöld Library

Legacy of a Secretary-General

Keynote speech by Sir Brian Urquhart

(Summary prepared by the Dag Hammarskjöld Library)

Sir Brian painted a portrait of Dag Hammarskjöld, the private man and the public man. He started by saying that Dag Hammarskjöld would have been delighted by the symposium, as he was passionate about books and libraries. Not long after taking up his post as Secretary-General in 1953, he stood gazing from his window high in the new United Nations Secretariat building and saw below, at one corner of the grounds, an ugly concrete block of a building, which had served as a temporary office building during World War II. This he designated as the site of the future library. He felt strongly that an institution without a library was not a serious one. A scholar and intellectual, had he lived, Dag Hammarskjöld undoubtedly would have spent much time there, so the Library is a fitting memorial.

Hammarskjöld was very protective of both his time and privacy. The companions of his leisure were the arts, especially books. As a member of the Swedish Academy committee that awards the Nobel Prize for literature and completely fluent in four languages, he read books from all over the world and set aside two hours for this purpose every day. He also translated—mainly very obscure and difficult—literary works into Swedish; when he died he was translating Martin Buber's I and Thou. He had an encyclopaedic knowledge of contemporary art and brought many beautiful objects into the United Nations building.

When he arrived in New York in 1953, Dag Hammarskjöld looked incredibly young, but his rather shy, quiet demeanour masked a formidable will and tremendous determination. Passionate about the goals of the United Nations, he was an intellectual in action who had an extremely well-thought-out, ambitious, long-term view of the new Organization—into which he managed to incorporate his brilliant resolution, through quiet diplomacy, of critical, short-term problems. He was not well known when he first took up his role as United Nations Secretary-General, but his first success, negotiating the release of seventeen American airmen captured by China during the Korean War, established him, in the eyes of the international community, as a master of crisis diplomacy. Within his first year, he had re-organized the Secretariat, considerably reducing its budget and shaping it into a viable, functioning organization. He established new relations with Member States, particularly the members of the Security Council, demonstrating what the UN was capable of doing for them. He pioneered peacekeeping operations. This became extremely important during the cold war for resolving, or at least containing, dangerous regional disputes which risked

triggering a wider conflict between the nuclear powers. Brilliant and courageous, he displayed such a capacity for leadership that the press took to trumpeting the slogan, "Leave it to Dag". This was a rather dangerous notion, perhaps, as it presupposed that the UN Secretary-General actually had power; whereas in fact it was Hammarskjöld's ability to conduct behind-the-scenes quiet diplomacy, a technique which he all but invented, that made him so effective. Additionally, his rugged independence ended up alienating him from two of the major powers, the Soviet Union and France, during the Congo crisis.

It is hard to describe the sense of loss, the void, that the news of his death created. There was a sudden and terrible sense that the world had lost a great asset. He was quite unlike anyone else. Essentially a lonely intellectual and visionary, he nevertheless was one of those unusual people who was a leader without any of the normal attributes of leadership. He didn't look like a leader at all, but everybody knew he was a leader just the same. He had a sort of mystique. Although he was an intensely private man and not at ease with other people, in some extraordinary way he was known all over the world. You could go to New Delhi or Rio de Janeiro or Prague, and people would know about Hammarskjöld and would have a surprisingly clear idea of what he actually was trying to do.

Hammarskjöld defined the office of Secretary-General. In the Dag Hammarskjöld memorial lecture delivered last year in Uppsala, Sweden, Kofi Annan said, "His life and death, his words and his actions, have done more to shape public expectations of the Secretary-General's office and, indeed, of the United Nations Organization, than those of any man or woman in history". Annan concluded, "there can be no better rule of thumb for a Secretary-General as he approaches each new challenge or crisis than to ask himself, how would Hammarskjöld have handled this?".