

Dag Hammarskjöld the International Civil Servant

- Integrity Matters

Presentation by Henning Melber

Panel "The unexplained deaths of Dag Hammarskjöld and colleagues:

Why UK cooperation with the UN's search for the truth is important"

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As a high-ranking Swedish civil servant, Dag Hammarskjöld had never been a member of a political party. But he was involved in influential positions of the Social Democratic government creating the Swedish welfare state as a trained economist. He served as the second Secretary-General of the United Nations (UN) between 1953 and his untimely death in September 1961. The 'Hammarskjöld approach' and its underlying principles are well documented in numerous of his speeches and reports. They speak for themselves and are therefore mainly quoted. His firm belief in the normative frameworks guiding his role as the highest international civil servant also documents, why his death was not only bemoaned.

For Hammarskjöld, the work of the UN should build on the commonality of humankind, its conduct and experience. His ethics, principles and credo were deeply shaped by his commitment to virtues, such as integrity and impartiality, which he used in the cause of both 'peace' and 'justice'. He shared the conviction that the organisation represents more than the sum of its Members. Many of his Introductions to the Annual Reports of the Secretary-General to the General Assembly and his speeches are masterfully crafted reflections which capture and re-think fundamental principles of international organisation. They address *inter alia* the distinction between 'impartiality' and 'neutrality' (1954), 'mediation' and 'reconciliation' (1955), 'good offices' (1959), the contours of the Charter as a 'constitutional framework for world-wide cooperation' (1960) or 'international civil service' (1961).

On April 10, 1953, he made his first statement in the General Assembly after taking the Oath of Office. He emphasised that the Secretariat's work "must be based on respect for the laws by which human civilization has been built. It likewise requires a strict observance of the rules and principles laid down in the Charter of this Organization. My work shall be guided by this knowledge." And only a few months into office he formulated his ideals on 14 September 1953 in an address at the American Association for the United Nations as follows:

As individuals and as groups we can put our influence to the best of our understanding and ability on the side of what we believe is right and true. We can help in the movement toward those ends that inspire our lives and are shared by all men of good will – in terms very close to those of the Charter of the United Nations – peace and freedom for all, in a world of equal rights for all.¹

On 14 June 1955 in a speech at Johns Hopkins University on the international civil service he maintained:

International service ... will expose us to conflicts. It will not permit us to live lazily under the protection of inherited and conventional ideas. Intellectually and morally, international service therefore requires courage, ... courage to defend what is your conviction even when you are facing the threats of powerful opponents.

Shortly afterwards, with the Suez crisis emerging in 1956, he faced the first serious test when in a diplomatic move he managed to receive the support of both, the United States and the Soviet Union for a mandate to intervene and establish the first peacekeeping operation against the will of France, the UK and Israel. In a Security Council meeting on 31 October 1956 he stated:

The principles of the Charter are, by far, greater than the Organization, in which they are embodied, and the aims which they are to safeguard are holier than the policies of any single nation or people ... The discretion and impartiality required of the Secretary-General may not degenerate into a policy of expediency. He must also be a servant of the principles of the Charter, and its aims must ultimately determine what for him is right and wrong. For that he must stand.²

¹ Dag Hammarskjöld, "Address at Dinner in His Honor Given by the American Association for the United Nations in Cooperation with the New York University Institute for Review of United Nations Affairs". New York, September 14, 1953 (UN Press Release SG/336, September 14, 1953; *United Nations Bulletin*, vol. XV, no. 7, October 1, 1953. In: *Public Papers of the Secretaries-General of the United Nations. Volume II*. New York and London: Columbia University Press 1972, p. 89.

² Security Council Official Records, Eleventh Year, 751st Meeting, October 31, 1956. In: *Public Papers of the Secretaries-General of the United Nations. Volume III: Dag Hammarskjöld 1956-1957*. Selected and edited

In his introduction to the Annual Report of the UN for 1959-1960 he reiterated:

It is my firm conviction that any result bought at the price of a compromise with the principles and ideals of the Organization, either by yielding to force, by disregard of justice, by neglect of common interests or by contempt for human rights, is bought at too high a price. That is so because a compromise with its principles and purposes weakens the Organization in a way representing a definite loss for the future that cannot be balanced by any immediate advantage achieved.³

For Hammarskjöld the UN was supposed to be the unique instrument for peaceful solution of conflicts. This required an urgent shift of emphasis from the purpose of preserving the established international (dis)order of the superpower rivalry between the West and the East during the Cold War period to the purpose of meeting and dealing in a constructive way with the challenges represented by the newly independent countries. When seeking a solution to the conflict in the Congo, he was increasingly criticised by the Soviet Union. To demands for his resignation, he responded in the General Assembly on 3 October 1960:

It is not the Soviet Union or, indeed, any other big powers who need the United Nations for their protection; it is all the others. In this sense the Organization is first of all their Organization ... I shall remain in my post during the term of my office as a servant of the Organization in the interests of all those other nations, as long as they wish me to do so.

Here he was interrupted by a standing ovation from the leaders of the new Member States. On 13 February 1961, in another response in the Security Council to the continued demands for his resignation (which now were also increasingly made by the Belgian, French and British, who saw their vested economic interests at stake), he stated:

For seven or eight months, through efforts far beyond the imagination of those who founded this Organization, it has tried to counter tendencies to introduce the Big-Power conflict into Africa and put the young African countries under the

with commentary by Andrew W. Cordier and Wilder Foote. New York and London: Columbia University Press 1973, p. 309.

³ Dag Hammarskjöld, "Introduction to the Fifteenth Annual Report." New York, August 31, 1960. In: *Public Papers of the Secretaries-General of The United Nations. Volume V: Dag Hammarskjöld 1960-1961*. Selected and edited with commentary by Andrew W. Cordier and Wilder Foote. New York and London: Columbia University Press 1975, p. 139.

shadow of the cold war. It has done so with great risks and against heavy odds. It has done so at the cost of very great personal sacrifices for a great number of people. In the beginning the effort was successful, and I do not now hesitate to say that on more than one occasion the drift into a war with foreign-power intervention of the Korean or Spanish type was avoided only thanks to the work done by the Organization, basing itself on African solidarity. We effectively countered efforts from all sides to make the Congo a happy hunting ground for national interests. To be a roadblock to such efforts is to make yourself the target of attacks from all those who find their plans thwarted. [...] From both sides the main accusation was a lack of objectivity. The historian will undoubtedly find in this balance of accusations the very evidence of that objectivity we were accused of lacking, but also of the fact that very many Member nations have not yet accepted the limits put on their national ambitions by the very existence of the United Nations and by the membership of that Organisation.⁴

Throughout his eight years in office Dag Hammarskjöld lived what he considered as the ethics of “The International Civil Service in Law and in Fact”. This was the programmatic title of his address delivered at Oxford University on 30 May 1961 – not much more than a hundred days before his untimely death. As observed by his former legal advisor in the Secretariat twenty years after Hammarskjöld’s death: “In its defense of personal integrity against the claims of power, and its invocation of reason and history, the lecture carries a powerful appeal even today.”⁵ According to his conviction then expressed:

...the international civil servant cannot be accused of lack of neutrality simply for taking a stand on a controversial issue when this is his duty and cannot be avoided. But there remains a serious intellectual and moral problem as we move within an area inside which personal judgment must come into play. Finally, we have to deal with the question of integrity or with, if you please, a question of conscience.⁶

And he continued:

... if integrity in the sense of respect for law and respect for truth were to drive him into positions of conflict with this or that interest, then that conflict is a sign

⁴ Dag Hammarskjöld, Second Statement After Soviet Demand for His Dismissal. New York, February 13, 1961. Security Council Official Records, Sixteenth Year, 933rd meeting. *Ibid.*, p. 349f.

⁵ Oscar Schachter, “The International Civil Servant: Neutrality and Responsibility.” In: Robert S. Jordan (ed.), *Dag Hammarskjöld Revisited. The UN Secretary-General as a Force in World Politics*. Durham, North Carolina: Carolina Academic Press 1983, p. 41.

⁶ Dag Hammarskjöld, “The International Civil Servant in Law and in Fact.” Lecture Delivered in Congregation at Oxford University, Oxford, England, May 30, 1961. In: *Public Papers of the Secretaries-General of The United Nations. Volume V, op. cit.*, p. 488.

of his neutrality and not of his failure to observe neutrality – then it is in line, not in conflict with, his duties as an international civil servant.⁷

Even-handedness, integrity, moral leadership, respect for otherness, loyalty to principles and ethical values, as enshrined in the UN Charter, were among the core values he represented. Dag Hammarskjöld held a firm belief in the autonomy of the office of the UN Secretary-General and the Secretariat, which ought not to be degraded to a mere instrument and conference machinery serving the interests of the powerful states. Hammarskjöld was determined not to surrender the power of definition to individual member states.

While in office since April 1953, Dag Hammarskjöld was heading the world organization during the period, when its transformation from an almost exclusively Western, post-World-War-II body towards a more global governance institution took place. This was the result of a growing number of newly independent countries mainly from the African continent, which impacted on the international policy and geostrategic interests during the bipolar times of the so-called superpower rivalry.

After eight years in office, in his last speech to the staff on 10 September 1961, he summed up the continued challenge as follows:

What is at stake is a basic question of principle: Is the Secretariat to develop as an international secretariat, with the full independence contemplated in Article 100 of the Charter, or is it to be looked upon as an inter-governmental – not international – secretariat providing merely the necessary administrative services for a conference machinery? This is a basic question and the answer to it affects not only the working of the Secretariat but the whole of the future of international relations.

Its end can be read and understood almost like a final will and shows the direct link to his first speech at the General Assembly:

Those of you who have had the opportunity of working in a national civil service or the secretariat of a national government know, and understand fully, the added responsibilities and problems that one has to face when working in an international secretariat. These responsibilities cannot be discharged, and these

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 489.

problems cannot be solved, save by our own inner dedication to the cause which the world Organization is pledged to serve under the Charter. I am sure that all of you will continue to respond to any demand made on this Organization in the service of this common cause.

Notwithstanding the structural as well as individual limitations while operating within the confinements of the UN, his diplomacy towards the end of his time in office was followed with suspicion and mistrust in the West and open calls for resignation in the East. This testified to his integrity. Revealingly so, the newly independent states remained to a large extent supportive. For them he was “their” Secretary-General.

When Hammarskjöld and 15 others in his company died in a plane crash near the Northern Rhodesian mining town of Ndola in the night of September 17/18, 1961, the adjacent white settler-minority regimes were visibly relieved if not jubilant. And despite the posthumous world-wide recognition and appraisal, the secret services and diplomats of all big powers had closely followed his mediation efforts to bring the Katanga province back into the Congolese territory. Re-assessing Hammarskjöld’s anti-hegemonic stance suggests that there were more than enough parties satisfied that he could not bring his mission to the planned end.