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Learning From Hammarskjold

By BRIAN URQUHART

Tyringham, Mass.

THE second secretary general of the United Nations, Dag Hammarskjold, died 50 years ago this weekend on a mission to the Congo, when his plane crashed on its landing approach to Ndola, now in Zambia, then Northern Rhodesia. In his eight years at the United Nations, he brought vitality to the world organization and established its secretary general as a major player in global affairs.

Hammarskjold's resolute international leadership has never been equaled. He developed the role of the secretary general at a particularly dangerous point in history to such a degree that "Leave it to Dag" became a slogan, even as he ran the risk of arousing the ever-vigilant defenders of unlimited national sovereignty. The men who succeeded him (when, at last, will a woman be nominated?) have often been measured against Hammarskjold, and they have referred to him as a model for their own efforts.

When Hammarskjold arrived at the United Nations in April 1953, most of the members of the Security Council were under the impression that they had voted for a competent Swedish civil servant who would not rock the boat or be particularly active or independent. The next eight years were quite a surprise.

By 1953, the cold war had virtually paralyzed the Security Council. Regional conflicts were potential brush fires that could ignite a nuclear East-West confrontation, and Hammarskjold became an accepted go-between; his first success was to negotiate the release of the American airmen who had come down in the People's Republic of China during the Korean War and been imprisoned as spies.

Some of the most powerful nations, including the United States, came to view Hammarskjold as an outstanding leader, even if they sometimes disagreed with him. Nikita S. Khrushchev's Soviet Union and Charles de Gaulle's France did not see him in this light. In a famous scene in the General Assembly, Khrushchev demanded his resignation. Hammarskjold refused and received a standing ovation.

Of all the people I have known, Hammarskjold was by far the most successful in organizing his

public life and his widespread intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic interests into an integrated and self-sustaining pattern. Literature in three or four languages, music, the visual arts and nature were his beloved companions, and his posthumously published diary, "Markings," showed that he was developing his own version of mysticism. His friend the sculptor Barbara Hepworth said, "Dag Hammarskjold had a pure and exact perception of aesthetic principles, as exact as it was over ethical and moral principles. I believe they were, to him, one and the same thing." But Hammarskjold's feet were firmly on the ground. "The United Nations was not created to bring us to heaven," he told an audience in 1954, "but to save us from hell."

Hammarskjold had few of the conventional trappings of a leader. For the secretariat, his authority was absolute because we respected the intellectual and moral effort and the judgment that went into his decisions, and the calmness and lack of pretension with which they were communicated. There is a photograph of him reviewing the first contingent of the first United Nations peacekeeping force on its arrival at Abu Sueir on the Suez Canal in 1956. His slight, lonely and profoundly unmilitary figure dominates the scene and leaves no doubt as to who is in charge. There was, I think, more than a touch of genius in Hammarskjold's passionate and imaginative service. It is this that makes him so memorable.

The cold war, the Soviet Union and the "balance of terror" are gone, and with them, one hopes, the ever-present threat of nuclear war. But the potential combination of unconventional weapons and terrorism, climate change and environmental degradation, global shortages of basic resources and the possible breakdown of the economic order present immeasurable risks unless the world's governments decide to address them seriously and together. Hammarskjold's ability to focus international attention on essential questions would have found full scope in this intensely troubling time.

The excitement, danger and hope of Hammarskjold's time at the United Nations are hard to recall and impossible to replicate. Governments reach agreement in the organization and outside of it to a far greater extent than before. The Security Council is exploring new ground under the concept of the "responsibility to protect." The international and independent leadership that was Hammarskjold's hallmark is conspicuously lacking.

What sort of person do governments want as the secretary general of the United Nations? For all the tributes pouring forth on this anniversary, there is no evidence that the members of the Security Council have ever tried to find another Hammarskjold. Can it be that eight years of dynamic leadership half a century ago was enough for them?

The Security Council has recommended, and the General Assembly has approved, a second five-year term for Secretary General Ban Ki-moon. But the process of finding his successor by an imaginative, widespread search procedure should start soon. In a time of ominous global problems,

the example of Dag Hammarskjold could provide important guidance in that search.

Brian Urquhart, a former under secretary general of the United Nations, is the author of "Hammarskjold," among other books.



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