
The UN Secretariat



International
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The UN Secretariat

A Brief History (1945 - 2006)

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Cover: An artist's conception of the UN headquarters prior to its completion, October 1949.

UNITED NATIONS/DPI PHOTO. **Chapter One:** League of Nations Secretary-General Sir Eric Drummond (and staff), League of Nations Archives, UNOG Library. The UN Preparatory Commission meets in London, 1945 Hulton Archive, Getty Images. **Chapter Two:** The newly elected Lie confers with the UN's Executive Secretary, Gladwyn Jebb, 1946 UNITED NATIONS/DPI PHOTO. The Secretariat building under construction, taken during the UN cornerstone laying ceremony, 1949. © Bettmann/CORBIS. Lie at his desk at Lake Success, 1946 UNITED NATIONS/DPI PHOTO. **Chapter Three:** Lie welcoming Hammarskjöld at Idlewild airport, 1953. UNITED NATIONS/DPI PHOTO. Planning UNEF I, 1956 (Major General E.L.M. Burns, Chief of UN Command for the Emergency International Force, flanked by Ralph Bunche and Brian Urquhart), UNITED NATIONS/DPI PHOTO. Hammarskjöld arriving for work, 1956. Time Life Pictures/Getty Images. **Chapter Four:** Thant greeted by President John Kennedy, Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Ambassador Adlai Stevenson at the White House, 1962. © Bettmann/CORBIS Thant with Ralph Bunche, 1965. UNITED NATIONS/DPI PHOTO. Thant with Bertrand Russell, UNITED NATIONS/DPI PHOTO.

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Foreword

Terje Rød-Larsen

President, International Peace Academy

The International Peace Academy (IPA) is proud to present *The UN Secretariat: A Brief History* by Thant Myint-U and Amy Scott. This book, to our knowledge, is the first attempt at a history of the UN Secretariat. Perhaps this is because in general, bureaucracies do not make for particularly enticing book topics. Yet, as this book demonstrates, the UN Secretariat is not like any other bureaucracy in the world. Although it has been shaped by the characteristics of particular personalities over many years, the distinctive theme of the Secretariat's history is its politics, the product of its unique position at the crux of the world's only universal organization of states. Today, as throughout its history, the issue of reforming the Secretariat remains intensely political.

This book was researched and written during a period of just a few months, to begin what we hope will be a continuing discussion on the history of one of the UN's least researched institutions. It is informed by a sense that discussions on the Secretariat tend to misunderstand its fundamental nature and ignore the reasons for its well-documented pathologies. Moreover, despite sporadic calls for the bureaucracy to become "leaner" or "more effective," the question of Secretariat reform suffers from a lack of urgency among the UN membership as a whole. We hope that this book helps to encourage more historically informed and engaged discussions on what is, according to the Charter, a "principal organ" of the UN.

The history is eminently timely, coming as it does with the arrival of a new Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, in January 2007. As our authors note, such transitions provide a rare window of opportunity for significant changes at the Secretariat, sometimes in terms of practices and structures, often in terms of its senior staff

and occasionally in terms of the organization's entire direction and stance. Following several years of significant political, operational, and managerial challenges for the Secretariat, we hope this account is of some use to the new senior team in navigating the challenges of the future.

This book reflects IPA's continuing engagement with the full breadth of the UN "reform" agenda, which in recent years has included support to the Secretary-General's High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change and follow-up to the agreements reached at the 2005 World Summit. In the years ahead, we will continue and deepen this work through our substantive research platform *Coping with Crisis*, oriented around contemporary challenges to international and human security and institutional capacities to cope with them. Though this is a forward-looking agenda, we are well aware that one of our core strengths is an intimate understanding of the UN's recent and distant past. Since IPA's establishment in 1970, we have enjoyed a privileged vantage point from which to observe the UN's history unfold, due to our physical proximity to the building and our close working relationship with Secretariat officials and member states. This book reflects that privilege.

In presenting this history, I am deeply grateful to our core donors and contributors to the *Coping with Crisis* program, the governments of Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Qatar, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom, as well as the Ford Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundations and the Guggenheim Foundation. Without their generous contributions, this project, like so many others, would not have been possible.

Preface

...the degree to which the objects of the Charter can be realized will be largely determined by the manner in which the Secretariat performs its task. The Secretariat cannot successfully perform its task unless it enjoys the confidence of all member states.¹

- Report of the Preparatory Commission of the United Nations,
London 1946

In recent years, much debate at the United Nations has centered on the reform of the UN Secretariat and the way it is managed, a focus certain to continue as Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon takes the reins of the bureaucracy. Though this is a long-standing discussion, nearly as old as the UN itself, it is also one in which past reforms, arguments and counter-arguments, successes and failures, are quickly forgotten. There is a sense that Secretariat reform is a Sisyphean task, endlessly repeated with often little awareness of how things have come to be the way they are.

This book aims to provide a concise history of the Secretariat and hopefully a good background for future deliberations. It is neither prescriptive nor comprehensive and is only intended as an introductory survey. The book is arranged chronologically and focuses on the efforts of past Secretaries-General to reorganize and reform the Secretariat, deal with staffing and senior appointments and cope with various financial and management challenges. It addresses the Secretariat's peace and security work more than its work in other fields but this reflects the background of the authors more than anything else. Though there is sometimes mention of the various agencies, funds and programs, the main focus is the Secretariat and not the broader UN system

Before starting, we need to recognize what the Secretariat actually is. The Charter says quite simply that the Secretariat “shall

be comprised of a Secretary-General and such staff as the Organization may require.”² It is tempting to think of the Secretariat as a bureaucracy, with a relationship to the UN’s intergovernmental bodies much like the relationship between a national parliament or government to its civil service. Yet this would be wrong. For the Secretariat is, in many ways, a political institution, a place where the UN’s member states compete for power and influence and attempt to diminish the power and influence of others. The Secretariat’s standing at the nexus of competing and conflicting international agendas can often be the content as well as the context of its work.

With this caution in mind, it is useful to sketch the various day-to-day functions of the Secretariat in order to highlight its multiple personalities. At one end of the spectrum, the Secretariat acts as a sort of parliamentary clerk to the General Assembly and other intergovernmental organs, helping to organize meetings, prepare documents, take notes and so on. Second, the Secretariat is also a collector and provider of information, such as statistics on various social and economic trends or legal information related to the proper running of the UN, all generally at the request of member states. Third, the Secretariat performs certain executive functions, implementing the resolutions of the intergovernmental bodies. This was once a relatively small part of its work, confined primarily to technical assistance for developing countries, but in recent years this function has ballooned as the Secretariat has been tasked with setting up and managing ever more complex peacekeeping operations. Fourth is the Secretary-General’s role, not explicit in the Charter, of preventing or mediating conflicts, through his “good offices.” And fifth is the role, not in the Charter at all, of the Secretary-General as a global agenda setter, formulating and promoting new ideas, say on human rights or environmental protection.³

These are all very different functions, but even a close look at the Secretariat’s organizational chart will not reveal these functions very clearly. They have evolved over time and we hope the stories which follow will help demonstrate this evolution.

Though this book is a history of the UN Secretariat, it begins

before 1945, with a brief look at its predecessor and model, the Secretariat of the League of Nations and continues with an examination of the Charter and the London Preparatory Commission of 1945-1946. The body of the book consists of a chapter on each of the seven Secretaries-General, closing with the appointment of Ban Ki-moon in October 2006. The book ends with a short section of “summary observations,” highlighting the recurrent themes, dilemmas and tensions that characterize the story of the UN Secretariat.

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