



UN Secretariat Item Scan - Barcode - Record Title

Page

144

Date

08/06/2006

Time

11:12:00 AM



S-0864-0012-10-00001

Expanded Number **S-0864-0012-10-00001**

Title **Items-in-Public relations files - interviews - Donald Grant - CBS  
Broadcast: U Thant and Vietnam**

Date Created **18/03/1968**

Record Type **Archival Item**

Container **S-0864-0012: Public Relations Files of the Secretary-General: U Thant**

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*56*  
*a very interesting article* *Ramus*

It is easy to dismiss the influence of the Secretary General of the United Nations, who has at his command no nuclear weapons, no guns, no tanks, not a single bayonet. But perhaps we are all learning something about the nature of power these days.

And now we find that Senator Robert F. Kennedy, seeking that most powerful office -- President of the United States -- has adapted for his own campaign use the public statements of United Nations Secretary General U Thant, the former schoolteacher from Burma.

When Senator Kennedy announced his candidacy he was asked how he would go about getting the war in Vietnam to the conference table, since he had accused President Johnson of failing to do so. Senator Kennedy suggested several things, among them a halt to the bombing of North Vietnam, a de-escalation of the war in South Vietnam, and a willingness to negotiate peace with the National Liberation Front.

Now it so happens that this is precisely the prescription for peace in Vietnam offered over and over again by United Nations Secretary General U Thant -- and rejected over and over again by President Johnson.

To most United Nations diplomats -- and certainly to the Secretary General -- it is very much to the credit of Senator Kennedy that he has adapted for his own uses this program for peace. Thant is not at all interested in receiving credit for the idea -- what he wants is for the war to end. And the Secretary General is still fully convinced that his -- or Kennedy's -- three-point program will move the war to the conference table.

Is it not taking too much of a chance, to end the bombing of North Vietnam permanently -- on the mere hope that peace talks can begin? What if peace talks do not begin? What if they bog down?

Senator Kennedy dealt with that question: Stop the bombing, he said, and see what happens. No one can be sure until it is tried. It might -- unfortunately -- be necessary to resume the bombing.

On the record, Secretary General U Thant already had met the same objection in the same way. In September, 1967, the Secretary General said that the term permanent cessation has no meaning: the future is unknowable. But, added Thant, "I am convinced, and many leaders of governments friendly to Hanoi are also convinced, that once the bombing of North Vietnam is stopped there will be meaningful talks."

Last month, the Secretary General said he thought peace talks might begin within a few days of a cessation of the bombing. This was the information he had received in two talks with Hanoi diplomats, one in Asia and one in Europe. He reported this to President Johnson.

But Secretary of State Dean Rusk in effect said he and the President did not accept Thant's assurances -- assurances, this time, that not only would there be peace talks, but that they would deal with the problem of de-escalation in good faith. So the bombing was not halted; instead, President Johnson announced that thousands of additional American troops were being sent to fight in Southeast Asia.

There have been other, similar, failures by U Thant to move the war to the peace table.

Indeed, by last September, Thant had decided that for the moment it was useless to try to find peace unless the bombing was halted, as a first priority. "If that priority is not met," he said, "I do not see how I can usefully pursue my efforts toward finding a peaceful solution." Yet despite this statement of temporary despair, Thant never gave up hope. On every occasion, in public and in private, he has continued to explore the possibilities for peace.

From time to time you could see a youngish-looking man with hair threatening to cover his eyes, taking the elevator up to the thirty-eighth floor in the United Nations building to see the Secretary General. His name, of course, was Robert Kennedy.

Last Feb. 1 Senator Kennedy brought along a little group, for lunch with the Secretary General, that included Jackie Kennedy, widow of the late President John F. Kennedy, Senator Kennedy's brother. Mrs. Kennedy, who had just returned from a trip to Cambodia, had stopped in Thant's native Burma, where she had picked a handful of decorative grasses. These she brought to the Secretary General.

Someone once wrote a book entitled Ideas Are Weapons. U Thant firmly believes that there can be more power in an idea than in all of the frightful military hardware that is killing and maiming Vietnamese-- and Americans -- in Southeast Asia today.

Peace is such an idea, Thant believes. Gladly he gives it -- to the young Senator from New York, or to anyone else who is able to receive this gift for the living.

This is Donald Grant, speaking to you from the United Nations.