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Election of Secretaries-General

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Ambassador Ortiz de Rozas, thank you for agreeing to participate in the Yale Oral History Project on the United Nations. I’d like to direct the questions today, if I may, to the process of the election of Secretaries-General of the United Nations. You were once part of this process and are familiar with it, having served on the Security Council. I wonder if you could just, first of all, give something of the background at the time when your candidacy was active for the Secretary-Generalship.

Certainly. First of all, let me tell you that I was never a real candidate. I had never hoped to become Secretary-General, nor cherished the idea and therefore never really behaved as a possible candidate. It all started and ended in 72 hours. So out of the 14 or so candidates that were actively campaigning for many, many months, I was the only one who, unlike the others, never experienced the difficult process of trying to get elected, and therefore thoroughly enjoyed the whole thing. For me, it all started and ended very quickly.

This would have been in late 1980, right?
No, I’m talking about December 1971.

On the first time, yes, yes, of course, of course.

Now, how I became involved in participating in this election was something very extraordinary. At least in my experience. You may remember that in those days the Security Council, of which Argentina was a member, was dealing with a very serious crisis, the war between India and Pakistan that afterwards resulted in the independence of Bangladesh. We were struggling day after day to find a solution but the Security Council was totally paralyzed because of the Soviet veto.

The Council had spend the whole night in an informal meeting trying to find a solution, and around 3:00 o’clock in the morning the Italian delegate, Ambassador Piero Vinci, proposed a draft resolution that, according to him, would not be vetoed by the Soviets. (The USSR had vetoed something like 11 or 12 resolutions.) This new draft was very aseptic from every point of view, and it posed only one request from the Security Council which was that a cease-fire take place. By then the Indian troops had advanced deep into what is today Bangladesh and had the upper hand in the war.

Ambassador Vinci argued that no one could veto this resolution which would achieve, if implemented, a simple cease-fire and put an end to the loss of lives.
At that point, I thought I should refresh the memory of the delegates with what had happened in the Middle East conflict, and I said that experience showed that asking for just a cease-fire was not enough. The cease-fire, in my opinion, had to be coupled with the withdrawal of all troops, all armies involved, to the point where they were before the war started. Apparently I must have argued this very forcefully because after my intervention, the Syrian Ambassador said something to the effect of "... you have spoken with the voice of the Charter, you have spoken like someone that truly has the letter and the spirit of the Charter at heart. You ought to present your candidacy to be the next Secretary-General.

Just for the record, let me add that eventually the Italian delegate introduced that very simple draft resolution which received another Soviet veto. Such was the Council's paralysis that together with the representative of Yugoslavia and Somalia I decided to invoke the "United for Peace Resolution" and place the matter before a Special Session of the General Assembly which, by an overwhelming majority, approved a resolution that, among other things, required a cease-fire and the withdrawal of all troops.

I made a speech before the Assembly and the Soviet delegate suffered a very serious defeat. So much so,
that some members of the communist block either voted in favor of the resolution or abstained. So you may say that because of my very active intervention it was very unlikely that the Soviet Ambassador would look at my candidacy favorably. But let’s go back to your question.

Perhaps I should bring to your attention that at that point the election for the Secretary-General was dragging on because the Council had met once to vote and not one of the 12 candidates had received the required majority of votes. According to the rules of procedure, to be elected Secretary-General a candidate has to have at least 9 favorable votes and no negatives votes or vetoes cast by any of the five Permanent Members of the Council. The first round of votes had taken place and the Representative of Austria, Ambassador Kurt Waldheim, had received the largest number of votes in favor - 9 votes - but he had also received 2 vetoes. He was followed by the Swedish Ambassador to Moscow, Gunnar Jarring.

JSS That’s a very interesting point. To repeat that, his candidacy was vetoed by 2 votes?

CDR Waldheim’s candidacy? On the first ballot?

JSS Yes, on the first ballot?

CDR Yes, he was vetoed on the first ballot by two Permanent Members. It was later known that these two vetoes were
cast by China, who wanted a Third World candidate and by the United Kingdom who wanted to protect the candidacy of Ambassador Max Jacobson of Finland. So, I presume that in order to shield its candidates, the UK vetoed Waldheim and the others.

As I was saying, after Waldheim came Gunnar Jarring with something like 8 votes. Felipe Herrera, one of the 3 Chilean candidates, then Max Jacobson, Sadruddin Aga Khan, Ambassador Shirley Amerasingh of Sri Lanka and the others. Max Jacobson, who in my opinion was an excellent candidate, perhaps the best of them all, got 7 votes. So the only one that could have been elected was Waldheim who was heading the lot with only 2 vetoes.

JSS Could I just interrupt there again to ask -- you were on the Security Council, were you aware that Waldheim had been campaigning so to speak, for some time?

CDR Waldheim started seeking support for his candidacy in January and the election took place in December, so he had actively campaigned for about 11 months.

I thought all along that Waldheim would be elected, and I informed my government that in my view, the candidate that stood the best chance of being elected was Waldheim.

Coming back to what I was saying, the Council had taken the first ballot with no results whatsoever.
During a brief recess, at that same meeting of the Council on the India-Pakistan war, the French Ambassador, Jacques Kosciusko-Morizet, approached me. He had taken what the Syrian Ambassador had said very seriously. So much so, that he told me that he had sounded out some of the members of the Council and he thought that I would stand a very good chance not only to get a lot of votes but most probably to be elected. So, he asked me, "Why don’t you present your candidacy?" I replied "It’s 3 o’clock in the morning, it’s Saturday and today at noon the list of candidates will be definitely closed. There is hardly any time to do so."

When you say, present the candidacies, who presented the candidacies?

Well he wanted me or Argentina to present my candidacy. Apart from the time factor I told him, "First of all, I don’t know whether the Argentine Government would agree to present my candidacy. Secondly, I don’t know whether I would really stand a chance as you say." All this time, I must point out that I had been representing Argentina at the UN for only one year, so I was really just starting my term in office. However, at the French Ambassador’s insistence, I promised to consult my government. That was, if I remember correctly, December 18th, 1971.
That Saturday was a beautiful summer’s day in Argentina. I tried to get hold of high officials in the Foreign Ministry but did not succeed. Some people urged me to call the President but I refused. Finally, I managed to speak to the Foreign Minister but it was already in the afternoon, and when I explained the reasons for my call I told him that what I was about to tell him was only of academic value since the noon deadline in New York had already passed. I went on to describe what had happened and my conversation with the Ambassador of France. Although the Minister was in full agreement with Argentina presenting my candidacy, I had to insist that it was already too late.

"Furthermore," I said, "I’m not sure I would get as many votes as I need nor that I could compete with candidates who have been campaigning for months." I thought this conversation was the end of the story.

But what had happened? Kosciusko-Morizet called me to let me know that he, on behalf of the government of France, had presented my candidacy. He had called Paris and when they asked his opinion he had told them, "I do not know if he will be elected but I am sure he will have many votes." So Paris gave him the go ahead. My candidacy was officially presented by France without my knowing and as Ambassador Kosciusko-Morizet
explained he had taken that step because something had to be done before the noon deadline and besides, I could always withdraw if I did not want to accept my nomination. Needless to say I was highly honored to have my candidacy presented by France, a country which I deeply admire and respect, and with which Argentina has such strong ties.

I suppose the others presented their own candidacies. Now you know how my name came to be included in the list of candidates for the Secretary-Generalship. As I was a late runner my name was only voted on the second ballot. When the results of the voting were announced I had 11 votes to Waldheim’s 10 but we both had one veto each. He still had the Chinese veto and on my debut I received the Soviet veto. Then a third ballot was taken and I was always on top of the list with 12 votes and the veto from the USSR. On the other hand, Waldheim went to 11 votes and no vetoes. The Chinese had switched from a veto to an abstention. So on the third ballot Waldheim was the winner although I had more votes than him. The best comment on the election came perhaps from my wife when asked by a reporter "What do you think of the results?" she said "I think they’re just marvelous. Carlos got the votes, Waldheim got the job, and I got Carlos."
 Otherwise, I would have lost him to the job of Secretary-General."

JSS What happened to the candidacy of Max Jacobson?

CDR That was an impossible candidacy. In my view, as I said before, he was probably the best candidate. He was an excellent Permanent Member and he would have been an excellent Secretary-General. But, alas, in those days in the UN he was a "no no" candidate. You see first of all Max was a Jew and neither the Soviets nor the Arabs, who influenced the Soviet position, were prepared to see a Jew as Secretary-General. Not even a Finnish Jew. Secondly, his wife and his father-in-law had been active Zionists. Furthermore, he was born in a place in Finland that was annexed to the Soviet Union after the Soviet-Finnish war. So it was obvious that the USSR would never accept Max Jacobson although they must have known, as everyone else did, that he was an excellent candidate.

JSS He continues to be quite interested in this particular election and the fact that he was not elected. At times he tends to place the blame on the United States for not having pursued his candidacy with sufficient vigor. What was your impression on that?

CDR I believe Max was really very hurt and bitter because he was not elected. Maybe he does blame the United States, I really don’t know. However, I don’t see how
the United States could have got him elected. For many of his colleagues, his was a lost cause from the very beginning, in spite of his high qualifications.

But let me tell you something for your research at Yale. After the vote, of course, the Security Council decided to propose the candidacy of Waldheim to the General Assembly. Immediately after the results were announced I asked for the floor in the Security Council. I think Everybody that voted for me, and I specially thanked those who did not vote for me, meaning the USSR, because the obvious message was that they wanted me to remain in the Security Council and keep on fighting for the cause I had very much at heart. When I was leaving the Security Council Chambers I realized that there were really many delegates that were resentful about the results. Not so much because of my candidacy or my personality but because they thought that the Soviet Union had vetoed a Third World candidate that could have very well been elected since the candidate had the greatest number of votes.

So there was a movement to object to Waldheim's candidacy on the General Assembly floor by casting a large number of abstentions. I myself thought that that would be a tragic mistake because if a large number of Third World countries abstained from voting,
Waldheim would become a prisoner of the major powers. It was the wrong move. So I decided to stop it and to do so I volunteered to introduce the resolution appointing Kurt Waldheim as Secretary-General of the United Nations. I asked for the floor, and while referring to the nominees, and banking on people being very gregarious, in cases such as these, and with a tendency to follow a leader, I began by speaking of Waldheim's curriculum, and what he had done and so on.

Then I devoted the last part of my speech to praise U Thant, the departing Secretary-General, for whom I had an enormous respect and deep feelings of friendship. When I finished I said something to the effect of "...for many years the UN will remember this great man that has been such a marvelous Secretary-General" and so on. I then turned from the rostrum, faced U Thant who was sitting behind me in his place, and began applauding. Applauding from the rostrum was a very unusual thing to do for a delegate, but I was counting on the other delegations following suit. And they did. The whole Assembly was applauding U Thant. I then left the rostrum and went to my seat with the Argentine delegation. I stood up, everybody stood up and for about 2 or 3 minutes gave U Thant a standing ovation. I, in my statement, had requested from the President of the General Assembly that a vote be taken
for Waldheim by acclamation. After the applause was over, the President—who was then Foreign Minister Malik of Indonesia—said "After this applause I take it that the Assembly wants to approve the nomination of Mr. Kurt Waldheim as Secretary-General." I applauded again, everybody applauded and no vote was taken. That prevented, for the first time, the voting process for the election of the Secretary-General from taking place. Thus, I frustrated the attempt of those who wanted to push for a vote in abstention.

JSS That's very interesting. Now in this whole period of the Waldheim campaign and the election, was there ever any discussion of his background?

CDR No, no. The only discussion of his background went as far as to express the view which I shared, that he stood a very good chance to be elected because a) he represented Austria, a country that has its neutrality stated in its constitution, and b) he had been a Permanent Representative at the UN, then he had been Foreign Minister, and again Permanent Representative. While he was Foreign Minister I was Ambassador in Vienna and saw him in action with representatives of the super-powers. If he went to talk to the Ambassador of the United States for let’s say 12 minutes, he would go rushing and talk to the Ambassador of the Soviet Union for 12 minutes, he gave equal amount of time to
both. So I thought, and many people agreed, that because of this balanced diplomacy he stood a very good chance. And let's face it, as a personality Waldheim was really colorless, didn't have any distinctive traits that would alienate this or the other delegate. So perhaps he was the perfect picture of what the five Permanent Members wanted, and perhaps may still want for a Secretary-General, I don't know.

JSS Which brings me to the next question and that is in this election, there was never any real discussion of qualifications as such, of a particular individual as opposed to another individual.

CDR I wouldn't know how to answer this because as I said before, I did not actively participate. The normal procedure, if one can speak of precedents, was that in previous elections the five Permanent Members got together and they themselves drew the picture of the candidate they wanted. I don't know whether in this election they did the same. I wouldn't think so, because it was the very first performance of the newly admitted People's Republic of China. Communist China had just joined the UN and I don't think that its representative, Huang Hua, entered, with a view of electing the Secretary-General, into the negotiations with the other four as had been the case on previous occasions. In any case Argentina was a member of the
Council and did not participate in any such consultation. Later, the Chinese Ambassador told me he had proposed to Ambassador Malik of the USSR to enter into a gentlemen’s agreement that none of the Permanent Members use their veto powers for the election of the Secretary-General. If they did not like someone they would abstain but they would not vote against him. Of course, the Soviet delegate did not accept this, according to Huang Hua.

JSS: This question not of the past but of just your views as to the present. As you may know, Brian Urquhart has just published a paper which makes certain recommendations about leadership in the UN. One of the main recommendations, which was enthusiastically endorsed by the NY Times, was that there should be a search committee established.

CDR: A search committee?

JSS: A search committee ...

CDR: Searching for what? For a Secretary-General?

JSS: Exactly, that this committee would go around the world, so to speak, searching out the right candidate, considering the qualifications and then the results of this search would be presented to the Security Council. My question really is, do you think that anything like this is feasible, or in fact desirable? Is it desirable to have a system where greater attention can
be given to, let's say, the managerial capacity of a man who is being considered for the Secretary-General position?

CDR Ideally I would think so. It would be quite in order that the managerial capacity of a prospective Secretary-General be taken into consideration. After all, the Secretary-General ought to be a good administrator. But I don't agree with my friend Brian on this question of a "searching party" going all over the world -- I mean, this would add to the difficulties they already have in finding, or in voting, for a Secretary-General. Maybe he's influenced by the fact that Hammarskjold, whom he served faithfully, was elected like that. That was a miracle. At one point, when there was an impasse in the Security Council, someone presented a Swedish banker by the name of Hammarskjold. The Soviets didn't even know, at the time, how to spell his name, and they gave their consent to the election of Hammarskjold because a very forceful case had been made for him as being very capable and having many qualifications. But it is well known that the Russians later developed a ferocious opposition for Hammarskjold. They never repeated the same mistake again.

Perhaps the Security Council should look over a list of candidates, declared or undeclared and if they
find someone -- regardless of nationality -- that would be a good Secretary-General, they ought to propose him for the job.

JSS That's a very interesting point and it's on that I would like to ask perhaps a final question.

Just to continue that -- the point I wanted to clarify was this -- as to whether in your view, it is procedurally possible for the Security Council to decide on a candidate to recommend to the General Assembly who actually has not been endorsed by his own government, or who has not been recommended by any government?

CDR I think so. I think the Council should not stick to a list of candidates, but look around and if they find someone that they consider worthy of the task of Secretary-General, they ought to reach out to him, regardless of whether he has been presented by his government, or by any other government, or not presented at all.

Nowhere, but nowhere, is it written that a candidate has to be presented by a certain government. So these are the parameters the Security Council ought to use in selecting a candidate. They have to get the best man for the job. But I have further ideas about this that I would like to share with you. During the 48 hours from the Saturday I was nominated by France
till that Monday, when my name was voted, I spent the weekend thinking "God, what should I do if by a miracle I'm elected?" I have always been very independent-minded, even from my own government. And I always thought -- not only then, I still do -- that for a Secretary-General to be a really good Secretary-General he has to be independent. He does not have to respond to either a group of countries, or a group of interests, or anyone whomsoever. He has to act according to his conscience and for that he has to be independent and free of ties.

But how do you achieve this? So I thought about it for one entire night, and came up with the following solution. If by any chance I was elected by the Security Council I would reverse the procedure. How? Normally what happens is when one candidate gets the needed majority, the Security Council unanimously recommends his name for the approval of the General Assembly. Then the General Assembly votes his name. If he is well known, the better, but for many delegates they may just be voting on the basis of a curriculum vitae. Then the candidate who's waiting somewhere with a written speech, is invited to come into the room. After the voting has taken place and he has been elected, he delivers his acceptance speech full of pleasant words. Everything is rather mechanical, a
routine. My thoughts were that someone should reverse that. Had I been recommended by the Security Council, I would have gone to the General Assembly before the vote and I would have asked the delegates to first listen to what I had to say. I would have then proposed an agenda of what would do if I were elected Secretary-General, and told them "Do not vote on my curriculum vitae. I intend to cut the budget, to cancel many appointments, to develop the muscle of the UN and eliminate the fat. I intend to do this and this and this and that. Now, if you agree with me that there should not be any posts reserved for any nationality, that the Secretary-General should appoint the best men he can find, in every field, regardless of being an American, Russian, English or whatever, if you agree with me, vote for me -- if you do not agree with me, please do not vote for me and let the Security Council find another person."

Another thing, I would be committed to serve one term and only one term. I would not accept to be drafted, I would not present my candidacy for a second term, I would not yield to any pressure for re-election. Because for five years one could be independent. If a Secretary-General wants to have a second term, then he becomes a politician and would be in the hands of those who helped him to be re-elected.
I would say all this before the Assembly and I would leave the room to let them vote. If they voted for me, then they would have voted for an agenda not for a man. And this I thought would be the thing that would make a Secretary-General truly, truly independent.

JSS It's an interesting approach. Let me just ask you -- you did serve there, during the time both U Thant and with Kurt Waldheim. How do you assess the independence of each? And not just the independence but also the effectiveness?

CDR I think U Thant was by far more independent than Waldheim. Waldheim was obsessed by the Great Powers. Everything he did was looking at the Great Powers, but especially he was very fearful of the Soviet Union. That was always the case. I can give you many examples of this, of his real obsession. U Thant to the contrary was very independently minded.

JSS And U Thant maintained the confidence of the Third World members during his tenure, would you say, the whole time?

CDR Yes, I think U Thant was respected by everyone, even by those who did not entirely agree with his judgements on certain things. He was a man that really deserved to be respected. I can tell you an anecdote that tells you what kind of a man he was. I had just arrived in New York and in October 1970 I took charge of my
assignment. In January of 1971, U Thant called me and, to make a long story short, said that he wanted me to be his Under Secretary-General for Political Affairs replacing Jose Rolls-Bennett who was very ill.

JSS

The Latin American post.

CDR

Well, it wasn't exactly the Latin American post because Ralph Bunche, an American, had been at that post for many, many years. After U Thant offered me that very high position and I thanked him most warmly I said, "First of all, U Thant, I have to consult my government but I must be very frank with you. I have just arrived and Argentina is beginning its two year term at the Security Council. I am very much looking forward to this job of representing my country at the UN but of course what you're offering me is very tempting. In order to make up my mind and make the necessary recommendations to my government I need to know something. Next year there will be an election for Secretary-General. I will keep your answer confidential, but please tell me whether you might be re-elected, whether you're going to present your candidacy and/or if drafted, you're going to accept another term?" And he replied, "No, I can give you my very definite assurance, that I will never be Secretary-General again. You see" he said, "Next year I'll be 61 and I will have no more authority to place
UN members in retirement when they reach the age of 60 if I, while the highest ranking administrative officer in the UN, keep on being Secretary-General. No, at 61 I should never be re-elected." His answer helped me make up my mind. I turned down his generous offer.

Quite a man, U Thant. Waldheim, on the other hand, was very resilient. For instance he never got the message that he wasn’t wanted for a third term. He needed 18 successive vetoes by the Chinese to finally abandon the race.

JSS And in Germs of managerial capacity, how would you assess Waldheim?

CDR I don’t think he had good managerial skills. If you look at the figures, it was during the 10 years of Waldheim that the UN increased in terms of personnel, budget, in everything. In my view u Thant was a much better administrator than Waldheim.

JSS Those are actually the only questions I have, but I’d just like to ask finally -- is there any other particular thought you’d like to put on the record, Ambassador?

CDR Concerning the Secretary-General?

JSS Right, in the interest of the UN . . .

CDR In the interest of the UN, I am very definite about the Secretary-General serving just one 5 year term. Some say 7 years, I personally think 7 is too long, maybe 6.
You can do a lot in 6 years. No more extensions are needed. I am optimistic about the future because I think that the UN is at what I call UN Year #1. It’s like setting the clock of the organization back to 1945 when the Charter was signed. For the first time, I am very hopeful for the UN. Hopeful because of the turn of events in the world. Everyone is really concerned with the crisis in the Persian Gulf, but in my opinion more important things are happening elsewhere. The Gulf has been the test to this new system of UN Year #1 and it has survived the test. Never before unanimous resolutions like those concerning this crisis were adopted by the Security Council. Not only with the favorable vote of the Soviet Union but with China’s as well. The UN is working as it was conceived to work. It’s reflecting the new realities of the world and this augurs well for its future.

JSS Thank you very much.