

H-Diplo

H-Diplo Article Reviews

h-diplo.org/reviews/

No. 460

Published on 28 May 2014

Updated 8 June 2014

H-Diplo Article Review Editors: Thomas Maddux and Diane Labrosse

Web and Production Editor: George Fujii

Commissioned for H-Diplo by Thomas Maddux

Bernard J. Firestone. "Failed Mediation: U Thant, the Johnson Administration, and the Vietnam War." *Diplomatic History* 37:5 (November 2013): 1060-1089. DOI: 10.1093/dh/dht046. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/dh/dht046>

URL: <http://h-diplo.org/reviews/PDF/AR460.pdf>

Reviewed by **Stephen Schlesinger**, the Century Foundation

The background story of UN Secretary-General U Thant's overtures to the Johnson Administration in the 1960s to end the Vietnam War is little known today. Professor Firestone's article, extensively researched and well-written, explains, in depth, the variety of paths Thant pursued over that decade in his unsuccessful effort to convince the U.S. government to settle the conflict with the North Vietnamese.

What is most striking about the Firestone piece is how it reveals the persistence, the untiring determination, and the passionate moral commitment of U Thant toward the goal of halting the violence in Vietnam. Flush with his success in helping the U.S. and USSR resolve the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, Thant sought as Secretary-General to interpose himself as a peacemaker in many crises around the globe – e.g., in the Congo, Cyprus, West Iran, Yemen and the India-Pakistan cease-fire. But his energies were mainly focused on finding a solution to the Vietnam hostilities. While Thant never had a formal role as an intermediary in that dispute – Vietnam was not a member of the UN and the Johnson Administration was rebuffing all outside mediators -- he became one of the most influential global figures calling for a negotiated settlement.

Thant began his efforts to resolve the fighting well before the Johnson Administration escalated the U.S. troop presence in Vietnam. Most notably, by April 1964, Thant publicly called for an accord to end the carnage in that country. He met President Johnson in late August of that year, pressing a proposal to initiate talks in Geneva with the North Vietnamese. Vexed by Thant's meddling, however, Johnson turned him down. Thant kept pursuing other opportunities, at times meeting with other UN member states and at times scouting out fresh leads on talks. Johnson, meantime, dispatched more and more troops into the battlefield, and by February 1965, commenced bombing raids over the North. Eventually Thant seized on what he saw as

a 'signal' from Hanoi and proposed a peace conference in Rangoon, Burma, between the warring parties. Johnson rejected Thant's plan.

Deeply frustrated, Thant vented his dismay over U.S. intransigence at a press conference in February 1965, his outburst alienating the White House. Nonetheless, he renewed his push for negotiations, calling for a three-step plan, including a suspension of U.S. bombing attacks and the opening of talks in Geneva. His plea again proved futile. By year's end, Thant ratcheted up his rhetoric even more so, attacking the war as 'cruel.'

By February 1966, the U.S. itself sought to place negotiations on the Security Council agenda. But it failed to follow through on its proposal, leading some to suspect that its initiative was a public-relations gesture. In the lull that followed, Thant renewed his three-point blueprint for ending combat, pressing President Johnson at a meeting at the UN in October 1966 to support it. These discussions went nowhere. Johnson even disclaimed any knowledge of Thant's previous suggestion for a Rangoon sit-down. In 1967, Thant, hoping to restart peace discussions, visited Rangoon, conferring with several North Vietnamese envoys. He cobbled together some language on negotiations, but eventually Hanoi repudiated his mission.

Thant's intense involvement in the Vietnam War came about for a variety of reasons. First, he regarded the conflict as an essentially colonial enterprise -- with not-so-subtle racial undertones. As an Asian, he shared the resentment felt by his region against outside Western intervention. He viewed the North Vietnamese fighters as primarily nationalists, not Communists. He rejected the 'domino' theory held by many in the American government claiming that Vietnam's fall would inevitably open up the rest of Southeast Asia to Communist takeovers. On the contrary, he felt Vietnam was independent of China and the Soviet Union. Finally, he criticized the unwillingness of the West to take into any account the Asians' desire to develop their own societies in their own way.

As noted, Thant faced profound resistance from the Johnson White House. President Johnson privately regarded Thant as 'naïve' and felt his various peace schemes were untrustworthy. For that matter, Johnson did not even take seriously suggestions for talks proposed by his own U.S. envoys. He held fast to the belief that the only way the North Vietnamese -- and their Communist allies -- could be defeated was through military force. Johnson's hostility to negotiations was puzzling, given the bloody stalemate Washington faced over the war. Some observers have argued that Johnson feared that if he 'lost' Vietnam, his Republican foes would accuse him of imperiling American security, just as another Democratic president, Harry Truman, had once been charged with damaging the nation by 'losing' China. Firestone does not explore this speculation.

Given Firestone's primary focus on Thant's crusade, he also does not spend much time on the crisis caused in America itself by Johnson's deepening involvement in the Vietnam war. For, even as Johnson was expanding the war in Vietnam, a burgeoning anti-war movement was arising within his own country; increasingly large and contentious demonstrations against the war were spreading around the United States; dissent grew among leading Democrats against his policies. Eventually, of course, these divisions led to a fierce primary challenge to Johnson's re-nomination in 1968, that, in turn, precipitated Johnson's withdrawal from the race and his acceptance of negotiations.

In the grander scheme of things, Firestone's piece clearly shows how easily the U.S. was able to thwart the UN – and, for that matter, all other third-party interveners – throughout the war. Johnson, it is true, occasionally made a few gestures toward working with the UN (and with other mediators), to end the conflict, but, behind the scenes, he exercised the prerogatives of a superpower to delay, neutralize and, at times, marginalize the Secretary-General and others in their efforts to bring about peace.

In this study, Professor Firestone has chosen to present Thant's series of mediation efforts in terms of their importance rather than by their chronological order. This is plausible, but it means that it is sometimes difficult to follow Thant's endeavors through their logical progression. Nonetheless Firestone's essay is a solid piece of diplomatic history. It provides a fascinating look both at U Thant's attempts to help end a grim war and at the actions of a wilful American president intent on derailing his initiatives. Firestone's assessment of this saga will be the standard by which all future studies will be judged.

Stephen Schlesinger is a Fellow at the Century Foundation. He is the former Director of the World Policy Institute. A 1968 graduate of Harvard Law School, he was a writer at *Time Magazine*, served as foreign policy advisor to New York State Governor Mario Cuomo, and worked at the United Nations. He is the author of *Act of Creation: The Founding of The United Nations* (2003), winner of the 2004 Harry S. Truman Book Award, and co-author of *Bitter Fruit: The Story of the U.S. Coup in Guatemala* (1982). He is co-editor of *Journals 1952-2000 Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.* (2007) and of *The Letters of Arthur Schlesinger Jr* (2013). He is a specialist on the foreign policies of the Clinton and Bush and Obama Administrations.

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