



H-Diplo Article REVIEWS

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No. 227- Author's Response

Published on **21 September 2009**

H-Diplo Article Review Managing Editor: Diane N. Labrosse

H-Diplo Article Review General Editor and Web Editor: George Fujii

A. Walter Dorn and Robert Pauk. "Unsung Mediator: U Thant and the Cuban Missile Crisis." *Diplomatic History* 33:2 (April 2009): 261-292.

Reviewed by **Bernard J. Firestone, Hofstra University** as H-Diplo Article Review No. 227, published on 6 May 2009. URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/PDF/AR227.pdf>

Authors' Response by **A. Walter Dorn & Robert Pauk**

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/PDF/AR227-Response.pdf>

It is gratifying that Dr. Firestone, a leading authority on United Nations Secretary General U Thant, has found that our paper, "Unsung Mediator: U Thant and the Cuban Missile Crisis," provides "a convincing case for a reevaluation of Thant's contribution to resolving the crisis." We also appreciate his conclusion that we "offer a necessary corrective to the historical record" and that we demonstrate "conclusively that Thant played an active role in the missile crisis." Moreover, Professor Firestone's own insights on Thant, whom he sees as an "activist secretary general" though history writers have tended to paint Thant in less appreciative terms, indicate that Dr. Firestone has also corrected the historical record on this remarkable historical figure.¹

It seems Professor Firestone is in agreement with us on Thant's active role in the Cuban Missile Crisis, though he takes issue with our characterization of Thant's role as a "mediator." He quotes Gerhard Von Glahn who states that a mediator must do more than "merely contenting himself with making negotiation possible." We accept Firestone's term "good offices" to describe Thant's role, but we believe "mediator" is also justified for several reasons.

First, Thant did very much more than merely make negotiation possible. His second cable to President John F. Kennedy and Prime Minister Nikita Khrushchev may well have averted imminent hostilities. As Kennedy said to UK Premier Harold Macmillan: "I don't

¹ Bernard J. Firestone, *The United Nations under U Thant, 1961-1971* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2001),

want to have a fight with a Russian ship tomorrow morning, and a search of it at a time when it appears that U Thant has got the Russians to agree not to continue.”² Moreover, on numerous occasions in the US ExComm, arguments *against* escalation were based on Thant’s efforts.³ In particular, Kennedy and Rusk not only argued against escalation because of Thant but they began to see his role in a grander sense as that of intermediary and his organization as an implementer of a solution, including by taking over the missile sites and verifying missile withdrawal. Thant was performing one of the mediator’s most important functions; he was providing a buffered communication channel, psychological support for negotiations, ideas for a settlement and hope during a dark crisis. President Kennedy, in the ExComm deliberations, sought to use Thant as a communication channel rather than seek a naval confrontation. When the Soviet ship *Grozny* was approaching the quarantine line, Kennedy, rather than ordering the boarding of the ship, instead decided to ask Thant to speak to the Soviets.⁴ When Kennedy received Khrushchev’s new demand for the withdrawal of American missiles from Turkey, his immediate response was to ask Thant to get assurances from the Soviets that the work on the missile sites in Cuba had ceased.⁵ Such referrals of matters to Thant in lieu of escalation indicate how Thant’s role was actively supportive of de-escalation and a resolution of the crisis. He cannot be fairly characterized as one who was “merely contenting himself with making negotiation possible.” He sought and achieved a role that went well beyond that.

Thant traveled to Cuba to mollify another of the chief protagonists, Fidel Castro. Thant also assisted with the negotiations in his own boardroom on the 38th floor between the American and Soviet negotiating teams. He sought ways to make any agreement verifiable by the UN or other bodies. Several draft trilateral protocols were developed in these negotiations and, though they were never formally signed, the discussions laid the basis for the bilateral verification measures and gave the parties a detailed understanding of their informal agreement.

Both Kennedy and Khrushchev fully appreciated the broad significance of Thant’s role. Early on, Khrushchev wrote to Kennedy stating “it is good, Mr. President, that you have agreed to have our representatives meet and begin talks, apparently through the mediation of U Thant [who] ... has assumed the role of a *mediator* and we consider he will be able to cope with his responsible mission.”⁶ Kennedy later went so far as to tell the

² Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow, eds., *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House during the Cuban Missile Crisis*, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1997, 404 fwd.

³ For an elaboration on Rusk’s comments see: A. Walter Dorn and Robert Pauk, “Unsung Mediator: U Thant and the Cuban Missile Crisis” in *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (April 2009), 277-278.

⁴ May and Zelikow, eds., *The Kennedy Tapes*, 493.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 529. Also see Dorn and Pauk, “Unsung Mediator...,” 281-282.

⁶ U.S. Department of State, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-63: Cuban Missile Crisis and Aftermath*, Washington, DC, 1996, II, 258. [Emphasis added.]

New York Times Magazine that “U Thant has put the world deeply in his debt.”⁷ Such words by the chief protagonists do not describe one who merely made negotiation possible.

Dr. Firestone has chosen a definition of mediation provided by Von Glahn. Many scholars in the fields of political science and international politics apply a broader definition and wider parameters for mediation. While we contend that Thant did much more than merely make negotiation possible, we would like to offer less narrow definitions than Von Glahn’s. Oran Young, a pioneer in the field, defines mediation as “any action taken by an actor that is not a direct party to the crisis, that is designed to reduce or remove one or more of the problems of the bargaining relationship.”⁸ Bercovitch observes that “some mediators make suggestions for a settlement, others refrain from doing so.”⁹ He elaborates:

Mediation behavior cannot be foreordained or prescribed in advance. They are part of the overall structure of a mediation event and context. Mediators choose strategies that are available, feasible, permissible, and likely to achieve a desired outcome. Mediation behavior is adaptable.¹⁰

Finally, Thomas Princen notes that mediators may provide “just enough change in perceptions and attitudes to tip the balance from a contentious to a cooperative approach to resolving the dispute.”¹¹ During the naval confrontation, this may very well have been what Thant’s initiatives achieved.

Thant’s messages also accomplished more. Thant’s second message transmitted Kennedy’s proposals as his own, making them acceptable to Moscow and enabling the parties to avoid hostilities and disengage from their standoff at sea. Prior to this both sides were so obsessed with the imminent danger of a naval confrontation escalating to nuclear war that they could not focus on the actual issues of the conflict nor begin to

⁷ Gertrude Samuels, “The Meditation of U Thant,” *New York Times Magazine*, December 13, 1964, 115.

⁸ Oran Young, *The Intermediaries: Third Parties in International Crises*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967, 34.

⁹ Jacob Bercovitch, “Mediation and International Conflict Resolution: Analyzing Structure and Behavior,” in *Handbook of Conflict Analysis and Resolution*, D. Sandole, S. Byrne, I. Sandole-Staroste, and J. Senehi, eds., New York: Routledge, 2009, 340.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 347-348.

¹¹ Thomas Princen, *Intermediaries in International Conflict*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, p. 3.

negotiate their resolution. Moreover, we found evidence in UN archives that this message was not only dispatched at the bequest of the US side, but was essentially dictated by Washington almost verbatim, so Thant was not only a communication channel but also a potent bargaining tool to effect compromise.¹²

Dr. Firestone also takes issue with the significance we give to Thant's advancement of the non-invasion proposal. We understand that others made the same proposal, notably Fomin to Scali on October 26, and even Khrushchev in his letter to Kennedy of the same day. We do mention these events in our article. We believe, however, that Thant was the first to suggest the non-invasion deal in his Security Council speech of October 24th. Furthermore, Thant gave the proposal salience and credibility with Stephenson and Rusk at a time when Khrushchev was sailing the idea as a possible way out of the crisis, still unaware of what Kennedy's reaction might be. Indeed, we believe it is highly possible that the Russian side even asked Thant to back the proposal to give it more credibility in Kennedy's eyes. (This is similar to Kennedy's use of Thant to send Moscow the proposal to end the sea confrontation, pretending it was his own proposal so it would have more appeal to the Soviets, or Kennedy's plan to ask Andrew Cordier to suggest to Thant that a trade for US missiles in Turkey be proposed to the Soviets.)

In advancing the non-invasion deal, U Thant was not "simply repeating what the Cuban ambassador to the UN had publicly stated two weeks earlier," as Dr. Firestone suggests. Thant was converting sterile Cuban Communist propaganda into a practical solution to the world-threatening crisis. Specifically, Cuban President Osvaldo Dorticos had enunciated on October 8, before the crisis broke on the world, a Cuban attempt to justify the existence of its military by claiming that "were the US able to give us proof . . . that it would not carry out aggression against our country, then . . . our weapons would be unnecessary and our army redundant." Thant's genius was to recognize that this general justification for Cuban weapons could also be the basis for disarmament and the settlement of the present crisis.

We realize we are attempting to revise an historical perspective. But the conventional view was construed via the published memoirs of those who for various reasons wanted the missile crisis to be remembered as a test of unilateral strength rather than of international mediation. This history was mostly based, as Dr. Firestone states, on such memoirs. Quite contrary to what is depicted later, Thant's role was widely appreciated during the actual conflict and indeed hailed with banner headlines in the *New York Times*, such as: "Moscow Agrees to Avoid Blockade Zone after New Pleas from Thant on Talks,"¹³ and "Thant's Cuba Talks Fruitful"¹⁴ and "Thant's Prestige Grows."¹⁵ We believe

¹² "Memo handed to A/SG [Acting Secretary-General] by Stevenson" (25 October 1962) file: "Cuba-Adlai Stevenson October 1962," UN Archives, New York, DAG-1/5.2.2.6.2, Box 1.

¹³ *New York Times*, October 27, 1962.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, October 30, 1962.

that Thant's true role was indeed that of a mediator, and that he deserves to be so remembered for his significant action during this important episode of world history.

In any case, this exchange of views should help to bring Thant's achievements to wider recognition and appreciation, hopefully making Thant less "unsung" as a mediator. Like Professor Firestone, we seek to document and accord due recognition to U Thant's contributions to the peace of the world.

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¹⁵ *Ibid*, November 4, 1962.