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Courage and Integrity in UN Leadership

Fabrizio Hochschild

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” At this time of great conflicts ... and violent clashes of interests, technological and economic developments have, as never before, brought us together as members of one human family, unified beyond race or creed on a shrinking globe, in face of dangers of our own making.¹

Sixty years ago, Dag Hammarskjöld, second Secretary-General of the United Nations (UN), spoke these words to students in a commencement address at Johns Hopkins University. What was forward-looking then, in the face of climate change, mass population flows, and cross-border terrorism is more self-evident today.

In light of the multiplication of transnational dangers, many look to the United Nations for leadership and solutions. They look to the UN for approaches that transcend short term political interests and advance the broader interests of humanity and the sustainability of our planet. They seek principled leadership based on the objectives and principles set out in the UN Charter and in international norms and agreements that reflect the highest aspirations of humankind.

Among the many traits that enable international leadership in unsettled, danger-ridden times, Dag Hammarskjöld promoted one as indispensable: Integrity underpinned by courage.

Defining moral courage

Winston Churchill referred to courage as ‘the quality that guarantees all others’². It is also the oldest attribute associated with leadership. As the history of the study of leadership is derived from a context of battle, much focus has been placed on physical courage. In the context of leadership of a norm-based international organisation in the cold cross winds of contemporary geo-political rivalry, equally or perhaps more relevant than physical courage, is its close relative: moral or political courage.

Moral courage is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as ‘that kind of courage which enables a person to encounter odium, disapproval or contempt rather than depart from what he or she deems the right course.’³ Where physical courage implies a willingness to face the fear of death, moral or political courage implies a willingness to face the fear of social condemnation, of ostracisation.

In a classical study on political courage,⁴ John F Kennedy argues that greatness in leadership stems less from cultivating popularity than from showing bravery in

promoting the principles one believes in even when such a course of action makes one unpopular. Kennedy portrays eight US political leaders whose courage he found exemplary because,

each one’s need to maintain his own self-respect for himself was more important to him than his popularity with others – because his desire to win or maintain a reputation for integrity and courage was stronger than his desire to maintain his office – because his conscience, his personal standard of ethics, his integrity or morality, call it what you will – was stronger than the pressures of public disapproval – because his faith that his course was the best one, and would ultimately be vindicated, outweighed his fear of public reprisal.⁵

The same was recognised by the former Prime Minister of Pakistan, Benazir Bhutto, who observed ‘ultimately, leadership is about the strength of one’s convictions, the ability to endure the punches, and the energy to promote an idea.’⁶

In the same manner that physical courage means showing a willingness to stand up to the threat of death for a higher cause or concern for others, political or moral courage means being willing to face popular condemnation for a higher cause or concern for others.

Kennedy goes a step further and suggests that a measure of social isolation and condemnation is inevitable to those who lead on the basis of integrity and courage. In the motto that introduces the book, he quotes from Edmund Burke,

remember that obloquy is a necessary ingredient in the composition of all true glory; ... remember ... that calumny and abuse are essential parts of triumph...

The constraints to exercising courage and leadership

The UN is an organisation where moral or political courage in leadership is a necessity to be able to advance, in an often hostile climate, the higher interests of humanity reflected in the norms and principles that define the organisation and lend it credibility and authority. While states depend for their influence largely on resources, power and knowledge, the UN depends for its authority on its moral standing. At the same time, much in the organisation’s operating environment and culture can mitigate against the exercise of moral or political courage in leadership.

The work of the UN unfolds in circumstances characterised by a series of opposing tensions. The first relates to the tension between its normative base and the more transient political interests of the governments of

its member states. The UN Secretariat and its agencies are the subject of constant political pressure related less to the normative framework of the organisation than to the national political interests of the governments of the day of its member states. The fifth Secretary-General, Javier Perez de Cuellar, described this in these words:

” *The idealism and hope of which the Charter is a luminous expression have to confront the narrow dictates of national policies.*⁷

A second set of tensions relates to the urgency of action required to address crisis situations the organisation deals with and the weight of UN's bureaucracy and risk averse culture. With the weight of diplomatic protocol and bureaucracy, action can be delayed or inadequate and the ideals can remain rhetoric.

In a 2006 reform report,⁸ Secretary-General Kofi Annan speaks of ‘a damaged culture, which is seen as limiting creativity, enterprise, innovation and indeed leadership itself.’ And more recently in a 2015 article,⁹ former UN Deputy Secretary-General Mark Malloch Brown, referred to

the heavy bureaucracy, the risk aversion and too often, the apparent abandonment of the exciting founding principles of peace, justice and human development that were intended to animate the UN's activities.

With reference to such opinions, Secretary-General Antonio Guterres who launched the most ambitious reform programmes in more than a decade, said on 16 January 2019¹⁰,

” *we recognise that many people still see our United Nations as ineffective. Cumbersome and bureaucratic. We all want a more nimble, effective, flexible and efficient organization. That is why we are reforming ourselves.*

In an environment with these constraints, in situations where there is controversy or there are contradicting views, where potentially unpopular decisions need taking or powerful interests require confronting, much in the organisation can gravitate toward caution or inaction.

But it is precisely the organisation's political constraints, heavy bureaucracy and conservative organisational culture that make enterprising, courageous leadership all the more essential. This is true at all levels of the organisation and especially in the field, where staff face especially tough choices and their action or inaction has a very direct impact on people's lives.

Hammar skjöld's views and values

No other Secretary-General reflected as much on the values of the international civil servant and UN leadership as Dag Hammar skjöld. As Secretary-General, he also lived the values he espoused. His words and his example have been used for guidance by every other Secretary-General, as well as inspiring generations of staff members in the UN and beyond.

Hammar skjöld saw three core values underpinning the work of the international civil servant: first, loyalty to the principles of the UN Charter and second, linked to it, independence from any national or regional interests and third, integrity. He stressed the importance of courage in order to be able to uphold these three core values.

The importance for UN leaders to uphold the principles set out in the Charter and not give in to contrary political pressures of member states could not be overstated. He told the Security Council:

*The principles of the Charter are, by far, greater than the Organization in which they are embodied, and the aims which they are to safeguard are holier than the policies of any single nation or people ... The discretion and impartiality required of the Secretary-General may not degenerate into a policy of expedience. He must also be a servant of the principles of the Charter, and its aims must ultimately determine what for him is right and wrong. For that he must stand...*¹¹

Courageous loyalty to the ideals of the Charter and international law was held by Hammar skjöld as an even higher value than impartiality.¹² As he pointed out in a speech at Oxford in 1961,

*in the last analysis, this is a question of integrity, and if integrity in the sense of respect for law and respect for truth were to drive (the Secretary-General) in to positions of conflict with this or that interest, then that conflict is a sign of his neutrality and not of his failure to observe neutrality – then it is in line not in conflict, with his duties as an international civil servant.*¹³

Integrity as the pursuit of UN values

Beyond loyalty to the Charter, Hammarskjöld also frequently stressed the value of integrity as the indispensable leadership characteristic required of UN staff. He concluded his Johns Hopkins commencement speech with the words: ‘*Those who are called upon to be teachers or leaders may profit from intelligence but can only justify their position by integrity.*’

It is important to note that integrity was understood by Hammarskjöld in a broader sense than often it is used at the United Nations today: Integrity did not only mean refraining from financial or other professional or personal wrongdoing. It is an active quality linked to courage, a proven readiness to uphold international law and speak up for the principles set out in the Charter, even (or, in particular) where it is uncomfortable and personally disadvantageous to do so. Hammarskjöld understood integrity as equivalent to Kennedy’s understanding of political courage placed in the service of the UN Charter and UN principles. He explained this proactive, principle-based integrity as follows:

” *International service ... will expose us to conflicts. It will not permit us to live lazily under the protection of inherited and conventional ideas. Intellectually and morally, international service therefore requires courage, ... courage to defend what is your conviction even when you are facing the threats of powerful opponents.*¹⁴

Hammarskjöld demonstrated this courage linked to integrity on many occasions. One such occasion was in responding to an attack against him by the Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev in the General Assembly on 3 October 1960.

Khrushchev criticised him for his handling of the Congo crisis and called upon him to resign. In his reply, Hammarskjöld insisted – in words that elicited a standing ovation – that he would stay on as long as other, less powerful Member States wished him to do so. He noted his responsibility was to all Member States and to the organisation as a whole:

” *It is not the Soviet Union or, indeed, any other big powers who need the United Nations for their protection; it is all the others. In this sense the Organization is first of all their Organization ... I shall remain in my post during the term of my office as a servant of the Organization in the interests of all those other nations, as long as they wish me to do so. In this context the representative of the Soviet Union spoke of courage. It is very easy to resign; it is not so easy to stay on. It is very easy to bow to the wish of a big power. It is another matter to resist.*¹⁵

Moral courage informed by political insight and vision

To uphold the principles and norms of the UN in what are often contrary circumstances, moral courage is required. At the same time, courage has to be exercised with a clear understanding of the political environment and political insight. As Hammarskjöld said the UN had to be politically celibate but not politically virgin¹⁶.

Echoing Hammarskjöld, a distinguished contemporary UN leader, Louise Arbour, stressed the importance of the combination of courage and clarity of vision and purpose: ‘*A leader must first bring clarity about what to do, then courage falls in place.*’¹⁷

In a morass of frequently conflicting political interests and pressures, advancing the principles and objectives of the UN means following a hazardous, unmarked path, which at times will require moving forward with caution and at other times will demand bold action. Courage, insight, foresight and judiciousness all need to be applied. The exercise of courage without insight can multiply obstacles to advancing principles. An approach however, that is informed only by caution and risk aversion is likely to lead to paralysis and the loss of credibility of the institution. It inevitably plays in to the hands of the powerful at the expense of the weak.

A situation specific mix is required of courage informed by political insight and vision. Unfortunately, while the importance of political awareness and vision are given prominence in UN training on leadership and as well as in writing on leadership in general, the value of political or moral courage are not given the same prominence in writings and teachings¹⁸ nor in UN mentoring and leadership discourse.

Clarity of vision, integrity and political insight are essential for leadership, but they cannot thrive where the courage to step ahead, to face controversy and to weather unpopularity or condemnation are lacking. Without moral courage, leadership in the fog of uncertainty and amidst the confusion of contradictory political pressures will flounder. The lessons of Dag Hammarskjöld and his example are today more necessary than ever.



An outdoor celebration in commemoration of United Nations Day was held at United Nations Plaza 24 October 1953. The outdoor ramps of the General Assembly building, overlooking First Avenue, served as a stage, with the Assembly building itself serving as a backdrop.

The upper ramp was used for speakers and for delegates from all 60 UN Member States. The lower ramp held flags of the member nations borne by Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts and Camp Fire Girls from the New York City area.

A general view of the proceedings as the gathering was addressed by UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld (upper right).

Endnotes

- ¹ Hammarskjöld, D., “International service,” address at John Hopkins University Commencement Exercise, 14 June 1955.
- ² Coote, C. (1949) *Maxims and Reflections of the Rt. Hon. Winston S. Churchill*, London: Houghton Mifflin, p. 168.
- ³ Oxford English Dictionary, 1971 edition.
- ⁴ Kennedy, J.F. (2006) *Profiles in Courage*, New York: Harper Perennial.
- ⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 218–219.
- ⁶ “Reflections on Working Towards Peace” in *Architects of Peace: Visions of Hope in Words and Images* (2000) edited by Michael Collopy
- ⁷ Quoted in Cockayne, J. and Malone, D.M. (2007) “Relations with the Security Council,” in Chesterman, S. (ed.) (2007), *Secretary or General? The UN Secretary-General in World Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 69.
- ⁸ A/60/692, “Investing in the United Nations: For a stronger organization worldwide,” Report of the Secretary-General, United Nations General Assembly, 7 March 2006, p. 20.
- ⁹ Brown, M.M, “The UN is an under-funded, bureaucratic labyrinth – and a force for good in the world,” *The Telegraph*, 26 June 2015, accessed on 3 September 2015 at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/11699243/The-UN-is-an-under-funded-bureaucratic-labyrinth-and-a-force-for-good-in-the-world.html>.
- ¹⁰ Speech to the GA of 16 January 2019: <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2019-01-16/secretary-general-remarks-informal-session-of-the-general-assembly-bilingual-delivered>
- ¹¹ Security Council Official Records, Eleventh Year, 751st Meeting, 31 October 1956.
- ¹² John F. Kennedy’s view on neutrality was also striking. According to a 1963 forward to “Profiles in courage” by his brother Robert (p. xvii), “President Kennedy was fond of quoting Dante that ‘the hottest places in Hell are reserved for those who, in a time of great moral crisis, maintain their neutrality.’”
- ¹³ From a lecture delivered at Oxford University on 30 May 1961. Quoted in Hammarskjöld, D., Markings, trans. Sjöberg, L. and Auden, W.H. (1970), New York: Alfred A Knopf, Inc., p. xix.
- ¹⁴ Hammarskjöld, D., “International service” (1955).
- ¹⁵ UN General Assembly, Fifteenth Session, Official Records, 883rd Plenary Meeting, Monday 3 October 1960, p. 332, paras 11 and 12.
- ¹⁶ “The International Civil Servant in Law and Fact”, Lecture delivered at Oxford University, 30 May 1961
- ¹⁷ Quoted in Hochschild, In and Above Conflict, *A study on leadership in the United Nations* (Geneva, 2010), p. 88.
- ¹⁸ A review of the indexes of dozens of books on leadership published in the last two decades showed that 5% include “courage” among the topics considered.

About this publication

This publication is part of a series issued by the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation commemorating 100 years of international civil service, which originated in 1919 with the birth of the League of Nations.

The series features inspirational and reflective think pieces on the concept of the international civil service by former and present United Nations' officials, as well as representatives from civil society and academia.

It relates to the Foundation's work on leadership, which strives to kindle a constructive dialogue on how to foster and secure visionary and principled leadership in the UN.

The Author



Fabrizio Hochschild is the Assistant Secretary-General for Strategic Coordination at the Executive Office of the Secretary-General (EOSG). He served most recently as Deputy Special Representative for the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA).

Fabrizio Hochschild previously served as Deputy to the United Nations Secretary-General's Special Adviser for the Summit on Addressing Large Movements of Refugees and Migrants. From 2013 to 2016, he was the UN Resident Coordinator, Humanitarian Coordinator and Resident Representative of the UN Development Programme (UNDP) in Colombia. From 2010 to 2012, he served as the Director of the Field Personnel Division in the United Nations Department of Field Support, New York; and from 2005 to 2009, as Chief of Field Operations and Technical Cooperation in the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), Geneva.

*This article is a shortened version of a book chapter by the same author: Leadership in the United Nations and the Challenge of Courage (page 355) in *Doing Peace the Rights Way*, Cambridge UK 2019.*

The author works for the United Nations.

The opinions expressed in this article are strictly those of the author only.



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