

Reporting the United Nations

By JOHN TEBBEL

OF ALL the communication gaps presently in existence, and their number seems to be multiplying every day, the one which appears to be growing at the United Nations must be among the most important. The U.N. is beset by troubles, but it remains the best hope for global coexistence. What is said and done there affects all mankind, and so it is essential that the U.N. be interpreted clearly and correctly.

Admittedly, this must be one of the most difficult assignments in the history of communications. There is, to begin with, a wide variety of concepts among the nations about what news is, and how it is to be interpreted. The press of each country more or less faithfully reflects what its government's policy is in this respect. The proceedings themselves are of an incredible complexity. The public sees the dramatic confrontations in the Security Council on television, and these are sometimes not easy for the average citizen to understand. But the correspondents see the daily working of a highly complicated, multilevel bureaucracy whose communications are expressed in the special language of diplomacy, which has been known at times to baffle even diplomats.

The job of unraveling what is done and said is the task of the U.N. press corps. It is typical of the situation at the U.N. that no one knows exactly how many people are in it. There were 218 members of the United Nations Correspondents Association in 1967, but that membership list includes some secretaries and office aides, reporters who have retired or otherwise departed, and an indeterminate number of working newspapermen who choose not to belong to the Association. The office of accreditations and accommodations has more than 1,000 people on its list, but these include, besides the reporters, secretaries, and office aides, all the photographers and the editors who spend only brief moments in the tall glass tower. For example, *The New York Times*, has anywhere from six to ten people accredited to its bureau in any one period, but at least four news executives of the paper have credentials to visit from time to time.

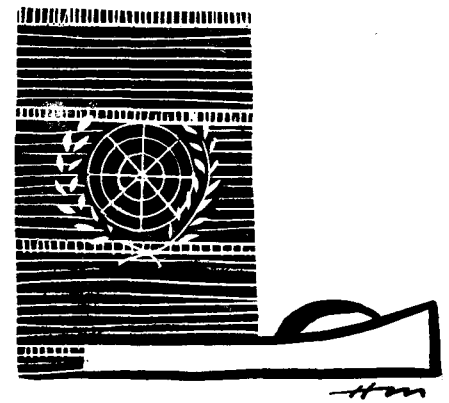
By the best estimate available, there are about 150 newsmen actually working at the U.N. during the period from January to the third week in September (except at times when the Security

Council is in session), and about three times that number when the General Assembly is in session, from September to the last week in December. At any time, about fifty or so are working newsmen who file every day. The real press corps constitutes these and the thirty-five or forty who are the news agency bureau chiefs, both foreign and domestic; the network broadcasters; the bureau chiefs of the major American newspapers; and foreign newspapers and radio-TV correspondents.

It is an elite group, numbering in its membership some of the best journalists in the world. Their average age is just under fifty; the Americans are a little older, the foreigners somewhat younger. The youngest is twenty-seven; the oldest, seventy-three. With only a few exceptions, they are college graduates and some have advanced degrees. The average correspondent at the U.N. has spent about twenty-eight years in journalism, and a little more than ten years at the U.N. American correspondents tend to have more experience in both areas.

WHEN these people sit down at the end of a day's work to file their stories, they need all the experience and education at their command, because the documents, speeches, and other printed matter which emerge from the U.N.'s mimeograph machines is a dense maze of language. Often, too, the reporter has sat through hours of debate in which nothing seems to have happened, yet a story must be written. The non-professional is likely to ask, "Why?", and the answer is that something has *always* happened, even if no action has been taken. It is the reporter's job to determine what it was, and where it happened that day in the vast framework of U.N. activity.

Inevitably, misinterpretations occur. Even the best correspondents are subject to error, and suddenly the small part of the public which is aware of what goes on at the U.N. is supplemented by a much larger audience wanting to know who is right and who is wrong. A classic instance occurred in September when Secretary General U Thant became involved in a front-page controversy over whether he had suggested that a specific resolution to end the bombing in Vietnam be offered in the General Assembly. Overnight this assertion, true or false, became a major story because, occurring in the midst of a political campaign, it quickly produced a rebuke from the U.S. representative, George W. Ball, who as-



serted that the Secretary General's alleged statement would not help the Paris negotiations.

But did U Thant, in fact, say what he was reported to have said? The complexity of U.N. reporting was strikingly illustrated by the way in which *The New York Times*, through its veteran correspondent, Drew Middleton, handled the story. Middleton, who succeeded Thomas J. Hamilton as U.N. correspondent in the summer of 1965 when Hamilton was assigned to Bonn, is certainly no stranger to world affairs. Author of six books on the subject, a war correspondent of wide experience, and a former *Times* bureau chief in Germany, the Soviet Union, Great Britain, and France, he could have been expected to bring a maximum of experience and background to his job.

Yet, even before the U Thant controversy, there had been some grumbling at the U.N. on occasion about Middleton's stories. The complaint could be at least partly discounted on the ground that they are normal for any kind of controversial reporting—and the U.N. is nothing if not controversial.

In any case, Middleton told his readers in the *Times* of September 24, 1968, in the lead story on page 1:

Secretary General Thant said today that if a resolution calling for an end of the bombing of North Vietnam were offered, it would be approved by the majority of the 124 members of the United Nations. Speaking at a news conference, Mr. Thant took the extraordinary step, for a Secretary General, of suggesting a specific resolution. He added, however, that it was not a practical idea because the Vietnam issue is not on the agenda of the 23rd session of the General Assembly, which convenes tomorrow . . .

Was this, however, what really happened at the press conference? Mr. Thant did not think so. Next day, the U.N.'s Office of Public Information issued a "Note To Correspondents," attributed as usual to a "United Nations spokesman," which said:

The Secretary-General's attention has been drawn to many newspaper

reports and broadcasts implying or suggesting that the Secretary-General either is encouraging a Member State or Member States, or proposing himself, to inscribe an item on the question of Viet-Nam on the agenda of the twenty-third session of the General Assembly with a view to having a draft resolution on the lines of his statement at the press conference yesterday, being tabled and put to vote. Such imputations or suggestions can come only from someone who either did not attend the press conference or has not read the transcript. It should be evident to anyone who attended the press conference, or who reads the transcript, that the Secretary-General made it clear that this was not a realistic idea in the present circumstances. The Secretary-General wishes it to be clearly understood that he has no intention of proposing himself, nor of suggesting to any delegation, to inscribe an item on Viet-Nam on the agenda of the twenty-third session.

Those who followed the Secretary General's urging to look at the record found in the official transcript of the press conference that, first, U Thant's comment did not come about in answer to a direct question, which no doubt suggested to Middleton and other correspondents that it was in the nature of a trial balloon. The question had been:

"With relation to the United States and Vietnam, you said once again on Thursday, Mr. Secretary General, that the essential first step—and I quote you—should be taken by the side which is the militarily more powerful and is therefore in a position to show magnanimity.' I ask you, sir, would you also apply that language, with its moral implications, to the Soviet Union's invasion and occupation of Czechoslovakia?"

But the Secretary General, with a diplomat's skill, neatly side-stepped that thorny question and thereby inadvertently got himself into another kind of trouble. "In the case of Vietnam, as you know," he answered, "I have been advocating the cessation of the bombing of North Vietnam for the last three years and more. I have given many reasons, but for the moment I would confine myself to one particular reason; that is, that I have been trying to reflect the collective conscience of the international community on this issue. I believe that the international community is deeply concerned over the war in Vietnam; and I also believe, on the basis of my discussions with Government representatives and even heads of state and heads of government of many countries, that the general feeling among the international community is that essential first steps should be taken—and must be taken—to move the conflict from the battlefield to the conference table.

"Just to put this to the test—of course, this is not a very realistic proposal—I

was wondering, at a session of the General Assembly, if a resolution on such lines were to be tabled and put to the vote, it would not receive a majority endorsement. The resolution would be phrased somewhat on these lines: 'The General Assembly, deeply concerned at the war in Vietnam, convinced that essential first steps should be taken to move the conflict from the battlefield to the conference table, so as to lead to meaningful and positive steps towards a peaceful settlement of the problem, requests that the bombing of North Vietnam—that is, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam—should cease.' I was wondering whether, if such a resolution were tabled, it would not receive the majority vote. Of course it is, as I have said, not a very practical proposition, since the item is not before the Assembly and not on the agenda. But what I am trying to explain is that I have been all along trying to reflect the conscience of humanity from this vantage point of the international organization."

THEN U Thant returned briefly to Czechoslovakia and answered the original question by remarking that he did not want "to add anything to what I have been saying in the past." But the damage had been done. It is not possible to determine, since Middleton's interpretation was repeated in so many other media, whether the correspondents agreed afterward on the *Times* interpretation, or whether some or most of the others simply followed the *Times's* lead, or exactly what mixture of understandings occurred. In any case, if it was not meant to be a trial balloon, the interpretation embarrassed the Secretary General, followed as it was by Ball's rebuke.

As he said in his rebuttal, U Thant *did* make it clear that he was not offer-

ing a "realistic idea." It was equally true that he did not say he had any intention of proposing the resolution himself, nor did he directly suggest that any delegation do so. On the other hand, the use of such phrases as "just to put this to the test" and "I was wondering whether, if such a resolution were tabled, it would not receive the majority vote," as well as the fact that the Secretary General offered this hypothetical resolution at all to the press, in what was obviously a carefully written form—these things quite clearly suggested to Middleton and others that U Thant was expressing unofficially a resolution he hoped *somebody* would offer to the General Assembly, even though it was not then on the agenda.

But it is equally clear that he did *not* say, as Middleton's story stated unequivocally that he did, that if the resolution were offered it would be approved by the majority. "I was wondering whether . . . it would not" isn't the same thing as "Secretary General Thant said today. . . ." He did, as Middleton wrote, suggest a specific resolution, and he did add that it was not a practical idea, but certainly never said he had any intention of presenting it himself or that any delegation should do so, and Middleton, at least, did not imply such a thing. He remarked only on the possibility that "some member might take the Secretary General's suggestion" and submit the resolution as a means of bringing moral pressure to bear against the United States.

When such a relatively simple statement, with its far-reaching implications in domestic politics and foreign relations, becomes a major story somewhere between utterance and the printed page, there is no reason to doubt either the difficulty of the U.N. correspondent's job or its vital importance.

NUMBERS, PLEASE!

The numbers and letters on the label that brings Saturday Review your way each week may not mean much to you at first glance. But they are essential in helping our Subscription Department quickly identify your records. That is why it is important to include your address label whenever you write Saturday Review about your subscription.

ATTACH LABEL HERE

CHANGE of ADDRESS

Please let us know at least four weeks before you plan to move. For fastest service, clip or paste your current mailing address in space provided, fill in your name and address, and mail to Saturday Review's Subscriber Service Division.

NEW or RENEWAL SUBSCRIPTION

Check here to enter or extend your subscription:

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> One year \$8 | <input type="checkbox"/> Three years \$18 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Two years \$14 | <input type="checkbox"/> Four years \$20 |
| Outside U.S. and Canada, add \$2 per year | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> New subscription | <input type="checkbox"/> Payment enclosed |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Renewal | <input type="checkbox"/> Bill me |

Name _____

Address _____

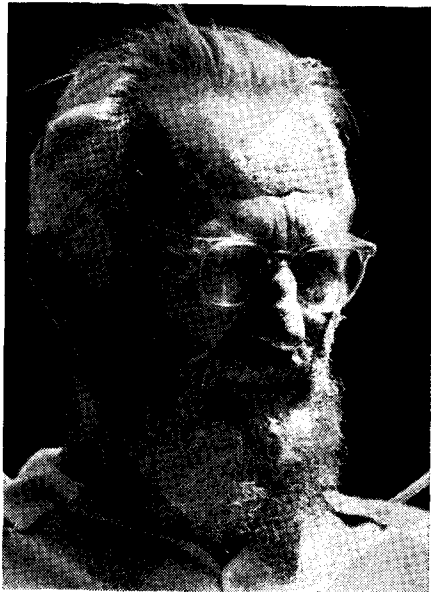
City _____

State _____

ZIP _____

Saturday Review

Subscriber Service Division
380 Madison Ave., New York, N.Y. 10017



—Joan Miller.

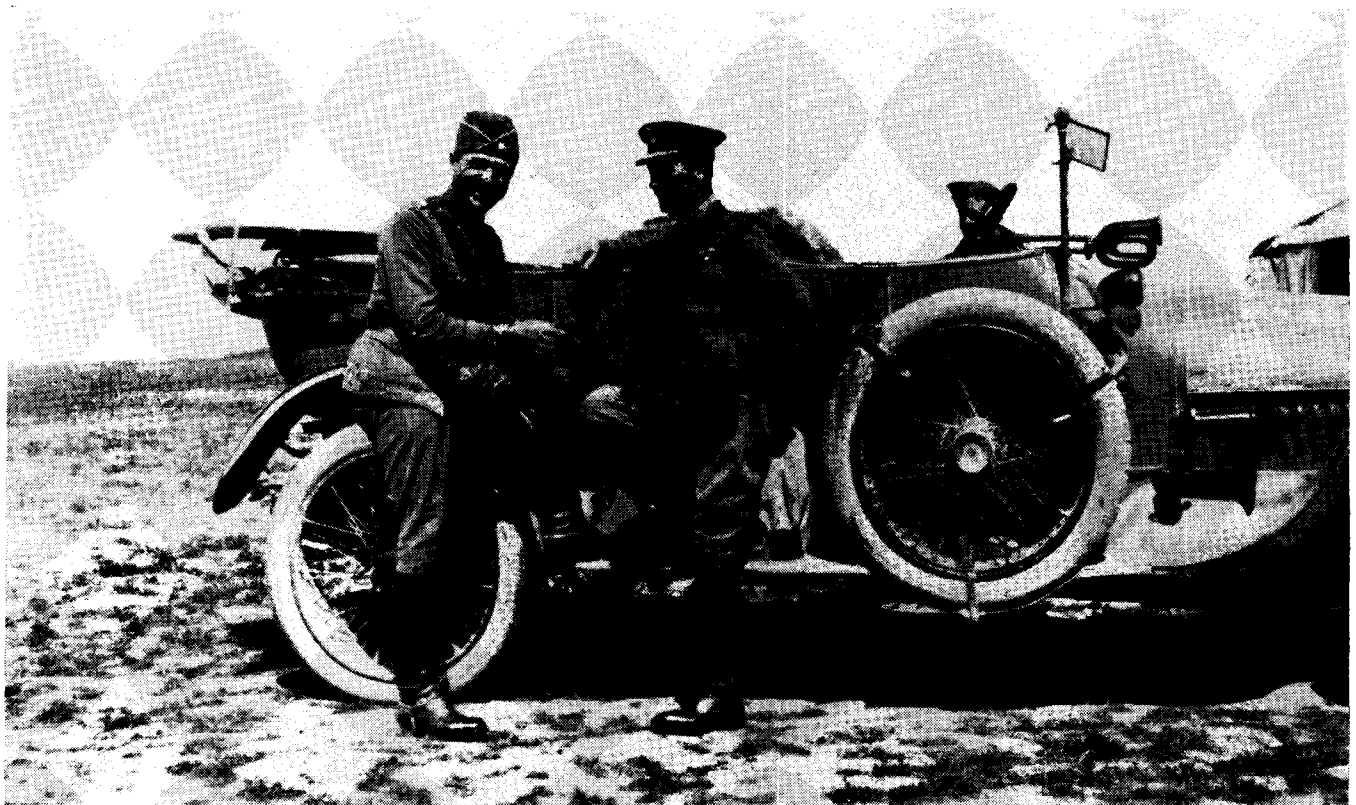
1963: Portrait made the year he received Presidential Medal of Freedom for contributions to art of visual communications.

(Right) 1881: *Carte de visite* of Ed- uard Jean Steichen, aged two, just before family emigrated from Lux- embourg to Hancock, Michigan.

(Far Right) 1900: First trip abroad—and first major showing of Steichen prints at Royal Photographic Society in London.



—Carl Björnerantz.



1918: As Major (later Lieutenant Colonel), U.S. Air Corps, in command of Air Serv- ice's Photographic Division and coordinator of aviation photography for the Army.