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Yale-UN Oral History

Interview with Mike Berlin

April 15, 2005

New York

Interviewer: James Sutterlin

YALE -UNITED NATIONS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

MIKE BERLIN

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UNITED NATIONS

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**Yale-United Nations Oral History**  
Interview with Mike Berlin  
April 15, 2005  
United Nations, New York City, New York  
Interviewer: James Sutterlin

James Sutterlin: Thank you very much, Mike, for agreeing to participate in this project. If I can, I'd like to begin by asking you to discuss a little bit about how well you were prepared to take over the assignment here at the United Nations as a correspondent, I believe in 1967?

Mike Berlin: I came to the United Nations on May 31st 1967. I was totally unprepared. I was supposed to go out to Riker's Island, which is the Municipal Prison in New York City, and do a feature story about the first drug program in a municipal prison, drug treatment program. They called me at my home and said don't go there, go to the United Nations, our UN man is sick today. So I came to UN Headquarters not even knowing where the men's room was, or unfortunately, not having read the first 12 pages of the New York Times in the preceding couple of years because I had focused on domestic news and was totally unaware that there was about to be a war in the Middle-East.

I ran into 2 people who were absolutely essential to me in those first days, one was Darius Jhabvala who was an Indian, a Parsi and was at that time the UN Bureau Chief for the Boston Globe. Previously I had known him because he was the UN Bureau Chief for the New York Herald Tribune, which I worked for when he was there covering the UN for them. He was very kind to me, he became my mentor at the UN and told me what to look for, what to ask about, who to speak with and who all these people were that I should be approaching.

The second person was Max Finger, who was one of the American ambassadors, whom I bumped into at the press release rack that first day, doing something about definition of aggression, which he was on a committee that was trying to negotiate a definition of aggression. He was very kind to me and would always look out for me and when he saw reporters there and ask me if I understood what was going on. With people like that, there were many people of a similar disposition that I encountered here, I was able to learn quickly on the job and not make too much a fool of myself writing about the war that began several days later.

JS: Well that's precisely what I wanted to ask next. What were your main reporting responsibilities so to speak?

MB: Well I came here for the New York Post, which was then a serious, liberal newspaper with real news in it and a very small staff which was very thinly spread. So I became the international news staff of the New York Post. They had no correspondents abroad on staff. They had one person in Washington who didn't cover State Department or international affairs. So from UN Headquarters I was writing reaction stories about various events that took place abroad, using as my base the UN and the contacts I could have through the UN with representatives of various governments

involved in those international things that we did not have staff out covering in the field.

JS: And that worked from here in New York?

MB: It worked to a degree in the sense that they used wire services for breaking news and they used me for the analytical pieces and the background and second day stories about what it all means and why it happens, how the Americans are going to react to this, how the Russians are going to react to this, and stories of that kind. So very often the Associated Press would have the lead story and I would have a secondary story on a large international event that was taking place.

JS: Had you known about Kurt Waldheim before you came here or anything about him as Secretary-General or was that also tabula rosa?

MB: I knew him of course because since I came in '67, he was the Austrian ambassador at one point and then Foreign Minister before he became Secretary-General and I covered very intensively the election campaign for Secretary-General as a reporter here. I remember the chief Soviet KGB operative at the UN Victor Lesiovsky telling myself and 2 other journalists in the Delegates Lounge, we will never allow a Finnish candidate named Max Jakobson to become Secretary-General even if the President of Finland Urho Kekkonen gets down on his knees in Red Square. He said it and we all went with that; it was public; it was quite clear at that point then that Waldheim would be the victor.

We had, courtesy of the United Nations, a press release with his biography, which said that he was injured on the Soviet front early in the war and spent the rest of the war years as a law student in Vienna. We didn't challenge it, nobody thought to challenge it. It was his malleability in dealing with the big powers that was a controversial aspect of his character when he was running for Secretary-General. We all wrote at the time that that was what endeared him to the big powers.

JS: Even then?

MB: Even then, even before he took the office. We knew, we were told that they liked him because he would be malleable and not make trouble for them.

JS: And did you find that he made himself available to the press fairly early in his tenure?

MB: He was available to the press and he was much more available to me when, starting in 1973, I also became the part-time correspondent at the United Nations for the Washington Post, and then of course he would seek me out and occasionally ask me to come upstairs for an exclusive interview on-the-record. I had no need to speak with him off-the-record. The problem was in his press conferences and his interviews, he seldom produced anything worth writing about. As I said at this conference we attended yesterday, very often I had trouble even writing notes in my notebook about what he was telling me, which was just the most obvious information that was perfectly available and had no insight or exclusivity to it. He was available but not of much use

journalistically.

JS: He was involved in a number of the so-called crises that were going on at that time. He did make an effort to bring about, not being the first or the last, a settlement of Cyprus. Was there any particular press briefing or background briefing or anything else done about Cyprus in those years?

MB: In those years if you wanted to find out about Cyprus you would go speak to George Sherry who was the Cyprus man among the peacekeepers. He was, to an extent available, he would sit and have lunch with us in the UNCA Club all the time and talk most entertainingly about his days as an interpreter, which is what he started out here at the United Nations as. To some extent he would tell us about what was going on in Cyprus but not the inside stuff about who messed up, who was at fault except on one occasion I remember, when Perez De Cuellar was the Secretary-General in 1986, they came very close to a deal on Cyprus and he was brutally frank about the fact that the Greek-Cypriots, pressured by the Papandreou government in Athens, had sunk the deal which was in their interest, although perhaps not in Papandreou's interest.

JS: That's interesting, that point because certainly later Perez De Cuellar, as I'm sure you'll tell me in a little while, considered that Denktash was largely to blame for 1986.

MB: George Sherry did not, and he was angry to beat the band about, it and he blamed it directly on the Cypriots being foolish enough to bow to Greek interests rather than their own.

JS: What about Afghanistan?

MB: Afghanistan of course was much later, both in its inception and its resolution. But it was the first item of international business on which it became apparent that this man Gorbachev in Moscow was playing things quite differently and had a different strategic approach to regional, bilateral problems that were irritants to American-Soviet relations and it was on Afghanistan that it became clear that the Soviets wanted out. And it was Diego Cordovez, who was a showman of great spirit and a publicity seeker as one of the Under-Secretaries-General for Peacekeeping, Special Political Affairs, who wanted the correspondents to be aware that he was making this fantastic progress toward an agreement on Afghanistan and ultimately he achieved it. I don't think that it was just because the Soviets and the Americans were ready to deal. He had to create the deal that they would sign on to and I think he did that with great brilliance and tenacity, whatever his other personality quirks.

JS: Yes, and that of course gets us well into the Perez De Cuellar period because Perez De Cuellar was...

MB: But I want to tell you that I was at a conference of American specialists on Afghanistan covering for the Washington Post, when one of the Reagan people got up and said what was the truth of Reagan administration policy towards Afghanistan. That was that the Reagan administration did not want the Soviets out of Afghanistan. It wanted to bleed them and he said publicly, he was taped by Voice of America, what he shouldn't have said, which in other words he revealed the reality of the Reagan

administration's policy, which was that "we won't let the Soviets out of Afghanistan until they bleed first."

JS: There was during Waldheim's tenure, the war in 1973 in the Middle-East and how was that played out, did Waldheim have a certain role in that, largely ceremonial.

MB: I don't remember Waldheim having any role whatever. I remember that it was after Kissinger went to Moscow and negotiated the end of the war with the Russians he came back and was putting it through the UN Security Council. A problem arose because the Egyptian Army was cut off in the Sinai and the Russians threatened to send para-troops to relieve the Egyptian Army and land actually in the Sinai and engage in part of the battle.

The United States responded and unfortunately this was confused in history with the Saturday Night Massacre in which President Nixon fired Archibald Cox and Elliot Richardson and others until he got somebody named [Robert] Bork to take over and fire the Special Prosecutor. So it was the same night that the United States called a red alert about the incipient Soviet troop movement to the Middle-East. At that point the United Nations intervened, not at the behest of the United States, not at the behest of the Russians, but because somebody saw that there was a dreadful disaster looming.

On-the-record at least it seems that it was the Yugoslav ambassador to the United Nations, who as Chairman of the Non-Aligned group at that moment and representative on the Security Council requested formally that the Security Council take up a proposal to interpose a new UNEF between the Egyptians and the Israelis and forcibly create a capacity to relieve the Egyptian army trapped in Sinai. That was put to the Russians and the Americans on the night of the Saturday Night Massacre and finally Jacob Malik, the Russian Ambassador, came back with acceptance from Moscow and the Americans let out a big sigh of relief because they could accept that. It was from that point on, on-the-record at least, that Brian Urquhart and his peacekeeping team took the ball and within 24 hours had units from Cyprus air-lifted to become the first operative elements of UNEF II.

So I didn't ever feel that it was Kurt Waldheim, himself, who had any role in that operation, that it was a diplomat who proposed it and the peacekeeping specialists who carried it out.

JS: Right, but there was a role for the Security Council and I believe that there was at one point that Kissinger had arranged that there should be a Geneva conference to reach a final signed agreement and Waldheim was supposed to Chair that, which he did but there was no conference.

MB: There was a first session of it, I attended the first session. It was in Geneva.

JS: But nothing happened there.

MB: The Syrians did not show up, but you did have the Egyptians and the Jordanians, not the Lebanese, they were not involved, sitting down with the Israelis around the



same table and you did have a mechanism agreed upon for future negotiations, and that mechanism was never used.

JS: It was never used.

MB: But what happened afterwards was that the UNEF II representatives, the General of UNEF II started meeting with the General of the Egyptian Army and the General of the Israeli Army at Kilometer 101. James Jonah, one of Brian's peacekeeping deputies, was sitting there with them and they came very close to reaching an agreement by which the 2 armies would be permanently disengaged and there would be at the Suez Canal, they would both mutually draw back from the Suez Canal and the Egyptians who were still at the Sinai, although they were being equipped by the UNEF II, would be withdrawn over the Suez Canal and this disengagement was very close to finalization when Henry Kissinger stepped in and pre-empted both the Geneva Conference mechanism and the UN Ad-Hoc Negotiating mechanism at Kilometer 101 by flying between Cairo and Jerusalem, actually Aswan and Jerusalem because the President of Egypt was then at Aswan and I was there with Kissinger on that trip.

The United Nations officials always felt that they could have achieved the same results, not in Syria but in Egypt without Kissinger. But he wanted to do it so that he could embark at that stage, after having ignored the Middle-East for the first 5 years of his term as National Security Advisor and Secretary of State, he could embark on the Middle-East peace process that he did embark on. And by doing it unilaterally rather than through Geneva, he made the Geneva mechanism, which had been set up by the Security Council resolution, moot - useless - and therefore it became an American operation, rather than a United Nations operation or a Soviet-American operation.

JS: And naturally Waldheim had no role.

MB: And Waldheim as a result of that had no role. One doesn't, sitting at the United Nations, look at Waldheim's role per se, one looks at Jonah's role or Urquhart's role and to the degree that they needed support from the Secretary-General to be forceful in enforcing the demands for what they needed. I am sure that he was, you know, absolutely essential.

JS: But that's an important point you've made there because that was I think emblematic of the Waldheim period. As we were just mentioning, James Jonah pretty much independently, as I understand it, worked out with the agreement with the Syrians.

MB: That's correct

JS: And he I am sure he was accessible to the press.

MB: Well he wasn't accessible to the press when he was on Kilometer 101.

JS: Well no.

MB: Except in a desultory way because he wanted to leave it for the Egyptian and

Israeli generals to make the running. But when he was at headquarters of course he was accessible to the press.

JS: Yeah.

MB: And I must admit one does need the Secretary-General and the Secretary-General must go out of his way to impose demands on the member states, to actually staff up the contingent necessary to make UNEF II work on a permanent basis rather than just on a temporary basis with troops stolen from Cyprus, which is how it began.

JS: Yes in the sense that the Secretary-General has to personally almost go to...

MB: Browbeat the Canadians and the Swedes and whoever it was to provide the troops necessary.

JS: Even though in these days it is my impression that Brian Urquhart did a lot of that also right?

MB: Yes there were some delegations which would be more than willing to do that because they recognized how close the world has come to disaster and that how necessary that that operation was. Other delegations needed the Secretary-General's intervention.

JS: What would you say were your principal sources available in the United Nations in the Waldheim period?

MB: By the time of the Waldheim period and the time shortly after he began, when I started working for the Washington Post, sources would come to me. People would say please my Foreign Minister is visiting the United Nations Headquarters can you do an interview with him and put it in the Washington Post. But by that time I had also developed my own sources and they were always the juniors; they were the juniors of the US Mission, not the ambassadors, except I include Max Finger in there, who was the 4th ranking ambassador. But it was the Legal Counsel, Bob Rosenstock, and the Middle East specialist whoever it was, the Iran-Iraq specialist there at one point was just fantastic. I once traded him for the Iranian Ambassador, there was a Lebanese Shiite journalist who wanted very much, I'm trying to remember his name, do you remember it?

JS: No.

MB: Cameron Hume. I traded Cameron Hume for the Iranian Ambassador, a Lebanese Journalist wanted access to Cameron Hume and I wanted access to the Iranian Ambassador and I got him access to Cameron Hume by promising to Hume that this guy was a reliable trustworthy person and he did the same for me and I was the only American Journalist who had access directly to the Iranian Mission at a time when the Iran-Iraq War was going on. And that's the kind of sourcing one had. But it was the juniors who were the best. It was the Canadian specialist on Human Rights in the 3rd Committee who was the appropriate source, the Canadian Ambassador was not as knowledgeable. It was James Jonah and George Sherry even more than Brian Urquhart

really, although I was a fool not to have used Brian because later I learned when he came to me that he was available all this time, although Ralph Bunche had not been, which was why I never even tried. So Ralph Bunche, of course, Brian's predecessor, was very inaccessible to media as far as being a source. He would converse very genially with you but never provide information.

JS: He was very punctilious about that I believe.

MB: And similarly in other delegations my experience was that unlike Washington where a really good Secretary of State -- Henry Kissinger, James Baker, Colin Powell - - could control the flow of information so that only he and his immediate aides knew what was really going on and therefore journalists depended on him. If you wanted to speak to Hal Sonnenfeld he would have to give the green light to Hal Sonnenfeld to speak to you and you knew that what Sonnenfeld was saying was going to be coming from the Kissinger perspective, or Tony Lake at the same year.

But at the United Nations that did not happen, nobody controlled the flow of information. There were 150 delegations of which at least half-a dozen on every conceivable topic were well informed and motivated to whisper in your ear and blow whatever it was out of the water. And so your sources were infinite and the intelligent members of the US Mission or the UN Secretariat would recognize this reality and would speak with you as well because they wanted to get their perspective across. So people like the Ambassador of Singapore, by the way, Tommy Koh, who was then the Ambassador of Singapore, always felt that the United Nations greatest contribution to world peace in its history was not the Cuban Missile Crisis but was 1973 and preventing the Soviet American confrontation in Sinai.

JS: In that connection, did you from these various sources get much information that you couldn't use because of its classification and because it was off the records and so forth.

MB: I had a very bad experience when I was very young with Max Finger again on the night that Cyrus Vance was flying between Athens and Ankara trying to get an agreement for the Turks to forbear from invading Cyprus despite the fact that the Greek Junta, the colonels, has caused a coup to be staged in Cyprus dispensing with the Government of Archbishop Makarios.

JS: Right.

MB: And the Security Council was meeting late into the night, past midnight, to try to provide the language that Cyrus Vance would ask it to provide, which would form the basis upon which the Greek and Turkish Governments would acquiesce to the United Nations Security Council and say ok we will not go to war. And at one point I asked Max Finger why are we waiting around this long and he said I will tell you on condition that it is off-the-record and that you don't ask anybody else about it and you don't use, no matter who else tells you about it, whatever I am about to tell you. And I said ok and he said Cyrus Vance has failed, he is flying home from Ankara tonight, tomorrow morning the Turks will invade Cyprus. I tried to weasel out of it but I couldn't in all conscience without losing my reputation and my honor so I didn't write the story

although I was the only one who had it. And ever since then I learned my lesson never to accept information really off-the-record. When somebody says, and they still do, I will tell you something off-the-record, I say you mean on background which means, in journalistic terms, that you can use the information, you can use the quotations, you just can't make your audience aware of who said it. You can say it was a West European source, you can say it was a British diplomat, perhaps, but not to the extent of losing the deniability of the source.

JS: And so you really didn't seek that kind of information.

MB: I never sought that information and if ever I had information that was damaging to somebody I [gap] in the fact that I was about to reveal it.

JS: Yeah. The Secretary-General to a certain extent gives the character of the United Nations itself because he represents it in so many ways.

MB: Yes.

JS: What was your assessment of Waldheim's success or failure in this respect? How did he in the eyes of the press corps in particular, what image did he convey of this organization?

MB: He conveyed the image of a postman, in which people would provide him with their positions and he would relay those positions as requested to the people with whom the providers would have difficulty being in contact. Therefore he was a central bank of information, which governments respected and appreciated and made great use of. I don't think he ever initiated great policies that would either serve world peace or serve the UN as an institution. But he was a caretaker and it was quite clear he worked very hard and he always talked about doing his duty, and by gosh he really did his duty as he saw it. I think he was conscientious about that.

JS: So in effect you are saying that he really did not convey a negative impression of the Organization. The Organization was fairly well regarded in those days, right?

MB: It was an organization of governments and he didn't challenge that in the least, and to the extent that that was regarded highly by outsiders than it was well rewarded. It was also an era, however, in which at least the General Assembly and to some extent the United Nations Secretariat was taken captive by a militant Third World. That damaged the reputation of the General Assembly and of the Secretariat, and to the extent that Kurt Waldheim, always the servant of governments, reflected that, it damaged his reputation as well.

JS: Then I believe that it resulted in a substantial increase in the size of the Secretariat at that time.

MB: So that they could write all these reports about the New International Economic Order.

JS: Right. What was the quality of the Journalists who were here in that era, in the

Waldheim years?

MB: When I came here in 1967, the quality of the journalists was still extremely high; not just the American but the correspondent for Le Monde, correspondents for the British papers and the BBC, who were actually prominent people in the journalism field in their countries and internationally. People like Pauline Fredrick of NBC was Bureau Chief here, somebody who was the first woman to be a political correspondent for a major American network. That began to erode not because of the Cold War I suspect, because it had been going on longer, before I got here, but because a) the Russians and Americans started doing business together. They weren't at each other as much except on certain specific issues where there was no common ground, b) the Third World took over not only the General Assembly but the agenda of the UN Security Council, and the UN Security Council became a place where you couldn't do business on the Middle East, you couldn't do business on Southern Africa, you could still do business on Cyprus and new topics were not being brought to the Security Council after the Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1970. So there wasn't as much to cover as far as political news as opposed to economic issues.

Certainly when Kissinger came to the United Nations to negotiate a deal with the Third World about defining some language with respect to the New International Economic Order that was heavily covered because Kissinger was here. But then when he left the further promulgation of

Third World opinion was not [covered]. The epitome of that unrealistic era was when Zionism was defined as racism and it became impossible for any discussions on the Middle East to be taken at the UN. Not even the five Permanent Members would talk about it. In an earlier era, the five Permanent Members would sit down together and negotiate the terms of a treaty between Israel and Jordan at the United Nations. That treaty did not come into fruition but it was the state of play on the Middle East at the time. The state of play on the Middle East moved outside the United Nations; the state of play on Southern Africa moved outside the United Nations. These elite journalists disappeared and they were replaced by journalists who were covering things that American audiences, London audiences and probably even French audiences didn't care much about, which was the fulminations of the radical elements within the Third World not the entire Third World.

JS: How did you understand the background of Zionism as racism resolution?

MB: Well of course it was a great American political issue because the American Ambassador, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, made it one, both before it was adopted. He heralded the dire threat that it posed and because he made great capital out of it and won himself a senate seat possibly on that basis although he was such a really is a popular guy he would have won it anyhow. But he used it for that purpose among other things. So that's the way the press looked at it. As far as impact on Israel and the politics of Middle East, it had no impact whatsoever.

JS: It had political impact on this country though.

MB: It had political impact about outrage against the United Nations and against the

radical Arab attitude.

JS: But I was thinking about the origin of the resolution. Was anything known about who dreamed it up, who was pushing it?

MB: At the time, it was the Palestinians and the Syrians who dreamed it up and the Russians who were pushing and their friends in the Third World. I don't know if it was in any way useful to them except that it made the Arabs more beholden to the Soviet Union than they might otherwise have been for what that was worth, which wasn't much. Is there something I have missed?

JS: I don't actually know.

MB: That was the assumption at that time. It wasn't a Soviet idea but they picked it up and ran with it with relish for that reason.

JS: And that was during the period of their bad relations with Israel. But you know Gromyko, whenever he made the statement on anything relating to the Middle East, would say that he was the one who cast the initial vote for the establishment of the State of Israel.

MB: And the Russians were the first one, who came close to being the first one, to recognize it as a sovereign country.

JS: Almost before Truman beat them at it. It is perfectly true that the Russians were out in front and the United States held back.

MB: The 1967 war was the turning point. That's when they broke relations, that's when there was no conversation between the Israelis and the Soviet diplomats even at the United Nations until long after Gromyko left. They held talks in the Indonesian Lounge. Prime Minister Shamir I think it was --

JS: That was his name, yes.

MB: held talks in the United Nations Indonesian Lounge, because that was the only place he could make contact to re-establish relations between Israel and the Soviets.

JS: A final question about Waldheim and his period is the one we discussed yesterday really, and that is DPI. Was DPI in any way useful in those days to the journalist core or did you have any impression of Waldheim utilizing DPI for a contact with the broader media community?

MB: When I first came to the United Nations under U Thant, DPI was much more central to me because I didn't really know these contacts. In that era there were still news stories being written about the meetings of the United Nations committees. In a later era, let's say when Ambassador Moynihan was the American Ambassador, he had to draw the attention of journalists to the actions of UN committees that he didn't like because journalists no longer covered those United Nations committees, with the occasional exception of the

Human Rights Committee of the General Assembly or the Disarmament Affairs, Political Committee of the General Assembly, there wasn't much news in what was being discussed. Occasionally somebody would give a speech that was newsworthy, in the same year Arvid Pardo of Malta gave a speech about the Law of the Sea. That was a very newsworthy speech and that started off an international negotiation or multilateral negotiation. That had overwhelming consequences that were very political. So that speech itself was a newsworthy event delivered in the General Assembly.

JS: And it was picked up?

MB: It was picked up. Immediately everybody paid attention. Even a Maltese Ambassador's speech was something that people noticed. Of course he didn't have the mechanism to advertise it to the news media very widely. But in future years, during Waldheim's years, during the, once the General Assembly voted to expel South Africa, by and large after that there wasn't much that the General Assembly did that was newsworthy. That was the same year of course that Yasser Arafat made his first very militant appearance at the UN General Assembly, and that was very newsworthy. After that the General Assembly, its activities were no longer perceived in the West as newsworthy, not just by Americans but also by other western correspondents.

So, the DPI was absolutely essential in covering all these meetings that were happening simultaneously so that in the years when those meetings were newsworthy, journalists would have a first alert that something was happening in some committee. And the way it would be done was sometimes just through the press releases that were put out, but more often through the DPI staffers who wrote the press releases. Before they wrote the press releases would go up to the press floor and say to journalists, keep an eye on the thing I am about to write that's happened in the 4th Committee or the 2nd Committee or the 3rd Committee, because there is some hot stuff there.

In that sense DPI was useful in the sense of letting journalists know what the Secretary-General's attitude was about things. DPI was sometimes useful when it was really very important. In that era, Ramses Nassif and Bill Powell would sometimes whisper in the ears of journalists that the Secretary-General takes this position, the United Nations is about to announce this. So DPI was a conduit, an essential conduit both in its printed material and in its personnel. DPI staff was more attuned to working with journalists and understanding what journalists needed to know. So if the DPI staff was sitting in on a meeting in the Secretariat with delegations that would be a good source to go to because they would know what's journalistically significant that happened at that meeting.

JS: And they were willing to alert you?

MB: And they were more willing to talk to the news media than some in the Secretariat. Otherwise, one developed sources in the Secretariat and in the delegations and, of course, the Delegations were eager to alert you to certain things that were in their interest.

JS: Alright, now I want to move on to Perez De Cuellar era and I want to start not with Perez De Cuellar but actually with the Spokesman, Giuliani was a new

force, I think. How would you describe the change?

MB: Well I knew Francois Giuliani when he was a junior reporter for Reuters, and we were friends. We would socialize together -- I mean at United Nations diplomatic receptions and other parties. So we had a long personal relationship, and I think most people who were long time in the press corps had the same relationship with Francois, he is a very congenial person. As a spokesman he didn't suffer fools gladly. I wasn't a fool, it didn't bother me. And even if I was a fool, he would have suffered me because of long term friendship. But there were people in the press corps who shouldn't have been in the press corps who would ask questions because it kept them from falling to sleep since they had nothing else to do. They weren't real journalists. Those people he did not suffer gladly and he alienated very many of those.

JS: But did you have the impression that he actually did represent the Secretary-General in the sense that it was known that he was very close to the Secretary-General?

MB: It was assumed he was fairly close to the Secretary-General, that he knew what the Secretary-General's attitude was about things and that he would steer you in the correct direction. I remember one story he steered me to wasn't quite the correct direction, he said we are negotiating with the Beatles about a reunion for Sahel Relief, and it became a worldwide sensation. They were in fact negotiating for a Beatles reunion on behalf of the United Nations fundraiser, it just never happened.

JS: The Beach Boys instead.

MB: But those kinds of things he did know and he was willing to share some information.

**Side- B**

MB: I think one of the reasons that the news media had great respect for Perez de Cuellar was because of Francois Giuliani because Perez de Cuellar really didn't interact directly with the news media in any effective way. So you have to credit his Spokesman for conveying that image of him which was very positive.

JS: That brings me to the next question. Was there a change in atmosphere in the UN as you perceived it with the change of Secretary-General? If so, I am sure the Spokesman has something to do with it, but I mean did it permeate very quickly that Perez de Cuellar was a different type?

MB: Everybody here thought Waldheim was a little bit of a joke, nobody thought that he was a Nazi. I must say that the quality of the UN press corps, myself included, should be judged in part by the fact that in 10 years when he was the Secretary-General nobody even questioned his war record, much less the details of it. So much for the press corps at the United Nations, including myself. But Perez de Cuellar was different, he was fresh air; he was somebody who was serious, he had, we thought, great ideas, although I am told that he didn't have that many great ideas that he just was a good diplomat. But yes, people thought that there was going to be a second coming of the United Nations under Perez de Cuellar and especially when early in his first term he



started with the Falklands Crisis, and for those of us who were here or who were sent here to cover it like CNN, people from CNN, they had great respect for the way he was dealing with it. And part of that is Francois and part of that is Perez de Cuellar, himself who grudgingly perhaps, I don't know, but effectively learned how to cope with and satisfy the needs of the press on one of the, you know, the crucial, Iraq-type stories of its era.

JS: He enjoyed it actually. I think it was his finest hour because the real diplomat was active.

MB: Right and he had finally something to chew on.

JS: In the mediation. One of his great qualities was his capacity to gain people's trust and he could do that.

MB: Part of that was the press corps, because nobody ever was disillusioned by him or felt that he was false or that he was misleading or that he was inimical to the organization.

JS: Things did not happen very much in the first 5 years of his tenure. He made a few changes though and I don't know whether they seeped through or not but one major change in United Nations terms was, as you know major responsibility of the Secretary-General is to submit an annual report to the General Assembly, which is supposed to summarize everything that is important. He insisted that that be cut down to a few pages because he thought that it was unreadable and was totally dull, etc etc. And that was done and actually Brian Urquhart took orders and wrote a different kind of report, a very good one. I wondered if this aspect of Perez de Cuellar got through at all?

MB: It got through only to the extent that the new report was basically an essay rather than a tour d'horizon.

JS: Exactly.

MB: And it became a news story because he was expressing an opinion about the state of the crucial events of the day.

JS: That is right.

MB: And so only to the extent that it was one more news story that we didn't used to have and that it was pungent and an attention grabber was it appreciated. I don't think that it was appreciated in an institutional form by journalists and I have no idea how Missions felt about it.

JS: So let's go on because he liked to skip over the first five years pretty much.

MB: No but if there is anything in particular any event

JS: Well there really wasn't. The main problem for that began to arrive was the

financial problem, which was tremendous bother to him I mean he was very unhappy with this.

MB: The financial problem was a big story in American media and of course for European media it was a big ha ha, the crazy Americans are doing foolish things again story. So it was a story. But it wasn't so much Perez De Cuellar, he wasn't seen as a big player in this but as an unwilling victim, who would raise his eyes to the ceiling and say "what can one expect me to do about this?" The story was carried I think by the friends of the United Nations in Congress and the United Nations Association and by the financial Under-Secretary, who I think a Finnish...

JS: Martti Ahtissaari.

MB: Martti Ahtissaari, who later became the President of Finland. And Martti Ahtasaari was eminently available to the news media; one didn't have to go to the Secretary-General's office. He was available to the news media, he was frank and he was blunt about the legitimacy of the UN position on these things and the willingness to go as far as he had to go in order to satisfy those idiots in Washington. I'm not calling them idiots, but that was quite clear, his view point. So I think the coverage from the UN was accessible and most of it was a Washington story.

JS: Although in fact, Perez De Cuellar had to intervene personally, which he did not like to do, but he did.

MB: One got the impression, not that he did, but rather that he did not like to.

JS: Well that's interesting, that's an interesting point, because actually he spoke directly to Reagan about it several times and ...

MB: Well I know, we all wrote about the fact that he visited Washington and met with Reagan, but what went on inside those conversations never emerged in UN press access and, of course, for White House press access, they didn't care.

JS: There is one other aspect of this period. A lot depends on the relationship between the Secretary-General and the Secretary of State in Washington. Did the press have any impression at all of the degree to which Secretary-General Perez De Cuellar was respected in Washington or paid any attention to?

MB: I don't know if it got through that he was respected in Washington specially. We were in an era when the American Ambassador was not very friendly to United Nations. I don't think that the US mission to the United Nations conveyed a great deal of respect for Perez De Cuellar, except obviously he was their candidate and he did serve 2 terms. So they had to be satisfied with him but their disrespect for the institution was palpable.

JS: Right, George Bush senior was a factor there; he and Perez De Cuellar had been friends, so it did come through, actually.

MB: It did, but as Vice President he did not intervene publicly at all on behalf of the

United Nations and to the extent he might have intervened in the counsels of the inner circles of the Reagan White House, that was invisible. It was known that he and Perez De Cuellar were friends, he made it known, Bush made it known that he and Perez De Cuellar had been close when he served at UN Headquarters.

JS: As you say this was a period when the Third World became extremely important in UN terms; Perez De Cuellar considered himself to be a person of the Third World. Did you have the impression that he was especially active or interested in African issues, in famine and things like that?

MB: No, he was not perceived by journalists as a person of the Third World. He was more European than the Europeans to some extent, in his persona, in his cultural tastes. Everybody knew that he listened to classical music because he would talk about it. And everybody thought of him as more Spanish than Peruvian.

JS: Which is true.

MB: And there was no common ground between him and you know the Algerians and the militants in the Third World and there hadn't been between the Peruvian Government and those elements when he was ambassador...

JS: Let me move just a minute from Perez De Cuellar, there was in that period a Director General in the Secretariat, he was the second ranking person and was responsible for economic policy. Did that have any impact or was anybody aware of the official- he was French at the time-it was the senior French position.

MB: Who was that again?

JS: I am trying to remember and the fact that you've forgotten it and so have I is indicative but I mean... [The name was Jean Riper.]

MB: I don't recognize that as being the fount of news stories. Perhaps it should have been. I don't remember what happened at all with respect to the United Nations and the economic realm.

JS: It was a result of one of the earlier reform movements when it was decided that there should be a more senior person who would be responsible for coordination of ...

MB: Economic issues.

JS: Of economic issues.

MB: Yes, but since there weren't any it didn't matter. I mean journalistically, I'm talking about it, as far as news value.

JS: As a matter of fact, he didn't have any impact inside either. But I was wondering the intent was to give the UN a higher profile.

MB: I remember going upstairs and speaking with the guy at one point and finding that

he was very vague and ineffective and what he talked about was ephemeral. What he talked about as important things were not important journalistically and I basically subconsciously said you know that's the end of that.

JS: Ok let's go ahead to some of the more interesting political questions; certainly that's the way Perez De Cuellar viewed it. Starting with the Iran-Iraq War, the previous Secretary-General had not been able to do anything with regard to the Iran-Iraq War; it had gone on for almost 8 years I think. Was it perceived that Perez De Cuellar did, in fact, take any important initiative in that respect and carried out some rather extensive and complex negotiations?

MB: Yes, Perez De Cuellar was seen as the only game in town with respect to the Iran-Iraq War, because the Security Council was polluted and the big powers were the reason that the Security Council was polluted because they all sided with Iraq. That left globally not just United Nations but globally only the Secretary-General as the mutual interlocutor. It was always perceived that the degree to which he could divorce himself from the Security Council and its resolutions, past resolutions was the degree to which he could be listened to by the Iranians. So he traveled to Iran and Iraq several times and all those trips were seen as the height of the public awareness that something might possibly be done to end the war.

As it turned out what ended the war was, the Americans shot down an Iranian civilian airliner and they really believed, perhaps correctly, that it was an American shot across the bow warning them to, you know agree to make peace. At that point they caved in. Vice President George Bush returned to UN Headquarters and appeared in the Security Council to say he was sorry it was shot down and after that peace was achieved rather rapidly.

The UN played a very important part in that by this God knows how many point proposal of Perez De Cuellar's under which peace would be achieved, including assigning blame for the War. And the UN, not the UN Security Council, but the Secretariat assigned blame for the War. This report came out and I remember vividly [the UN report] saying yes the Iraqis poisoned Iranian troops, yes the Iraqis poisoned their own populations, and they were blatantly at fault for violating the civility of warfare and the Geneva Conventions in what they did. That was the sort of face saving statement by an international authority that the Iranians could grab hold of and say you see we were vindicated in our position on the War.

JS: That's right, that was their final condition.

MB: That was a very well received report and that was a report that had a great news impact. That somebody was actually saying those Iraqis poisoned their own people, that was what came out in the report was so shocking, although we already knew that they did, but that the international community would say so.

JS: And then we went through a whole series of successful mediations.

MB: That was, of course, the first one on which Perez De Cuellar's role

was perceived as eminently successful.

JS: Right, that's true.

MB: Not just by the insiders but by the general public. I don't know if Perez De Cuellar was the first one who perceived that there were deals ready to be made on a wide range of international problem issues between the super powers. But I think the big powers at first tentatively began to feel one another out on Afghanistan -- that was the first issue - - and it was after that, and after the Reagan policy was modified, that Reagan began to believe that Gorbachev could be negotiated with that these other issues arose. That is when Perez De Cuellar, I remember writing the story, leaks to the press that he was calling upon the 5 Permanent Members to negotiate not just on Afghanistan, not just on Central America, not just on Angola, not just on Cambodia but also on the Middle East, which they didn't want to negotiate on. And that, in fact, he was calling on the 5 Permanent Members, and it became publicly known and a truism that now we have the 5 Permanent Members meeting on all these issues to the extent that the 10 non-permanent members were irritated and annoyed that they were now presented with *fêtes accompli* of resolutions resolving problems that they were not consulted about.

JS: Turning to Central America for a moment and Nicaragua specifically, was there a perception at that time outside on the part of journalists and others that something new was taking place, that for the first time the United Nations was going in to provide security and actually monitor the elections within a Member State?

MB: I think it was El Salvador.

JS: No, it was Nicaragua.

MB: Was it Nicaragua, the human rights component?

JS: Well there was a human rights component but no the first thing really...

MB: Was monitoring the election.

JS: Yes, monitoring the election.

MB: Yes

JS: But this was a Member State, United Nations had.

MB: The United Nations had never done that before.

JS: Never a Member State.

MB: Yes that was not a great, the fact that United Nations has never done it before was not a big deal. I think it probably had it early as in the '40s with respect to Indonesia.

JS: It had with regard to West Irian.

MB: Yeah, but before that, the independence of Indonesia from the Dutch was UN monitored.

JS: That was probably before Indonesia was a Member State. Again, I am answering my own questions, but for Perez De Cuellar this was a major thing because it had to be with very strict in terms of his interpretations of the Charter and to monitor elections in a Member State was tantamount, in his mind originally, to intervention under Article 2, paragraph 7 of the Charter

MB: Not if they agreed, I guess.

JS: Well that's the way he was convinced it was all right. After that he was completely ready [to agree to the monitoring of elections in Member States].!

MB: I don't think it was a big deal either journalistically or publicly or with the American Government. It may have been for him, a hump to get over, but it was not perceived as a big problem. I mean the Organization of American States had monitored elections before. In Nicaragua, it's the United Nations instead of the Organization of American States, so what? But it was perceived as the most natural thing in the world that the UN become involved because it had become involved in Afghanistan and all these other issues. Central America is not the first of the issues to come to fruition.

JS: No.

MB: So therefore they had precedent for it to have United Nation's role in these things.

JS: Yes, Nicaragua was the first one in terms.

MB: In Central America but not the first one of the special reps working out problems between parties.

JS: Oh no, no. Actually El Salvador was the first one in which the United Nations was prepared to deal with the insurgent group as an equal so to speak and it persuaded the Government to accept that and so El Salvador was the first place where this was actually done.

MB: I think El Salvador was seen as a great United Nations triumph whereas in Nicaragua, the UN played a subsidiary role.

JS: Yes

MB: But in El Salvador the United Nations was at least formally, the institution that came up with this innovative formula, a very complicated one for resolving its internal dispute, including the human rights component and human rights monitoring component. I think that one of the reasons that was made so clear to the public, through the media, was that there was a lot of briefing on it at UN Headquarters as opposed to Washington or elsewhere, and that the person who did the briefing, Alvaro de Soto, was very good at it and very credible and very sincere. That was also what the president of

Costa Rica won his Noble Prize for. So it was all part of this package that made the United Nations sort of magical at that stage. Then, of course, it went on to Cambodia and Angola and ...

JS: Afghanistan.

MB: Well Afghanistan was earlier; it was the first. And that's when Perez De Cuellar said well if we got all of these, let's do the Middle East and the Americans and the Russians didn't like him intervening and telling them what to do about what.

JS: But would you say that this period, these successes were the important ones.

MB: Yes and the explosion of peacekeeping presence around the world.

JS: Around the world, more than it had been since the Congo.

JS: There were more journalists, I think, that came.

MB: Because once these things began to happen you had the Los Angeles Times and other news media, and I think Le Monde as well, and the British papers started returning to UN Headquarters with permanent staff.

JS: So this is kind of a loaded question, but the image of the United Nations changed in this period, right?

MB: Right. The Cold War was ending through the United Nations.

JS: But in this case it was the image of the United Nations rather than of the Secretary-General as representing the United Nations would you say or not?

MB: I think it was the image of the United Nations but also of the Secretary-General that was seen as a great facilitator. It was seen, at least to knowledgeable people, that the United Nations has a Secretary-General with whom all these things are possible. We can rely on Perez de Cuellar to deal with the peacekeeping, we can rely on his staff to deal with the peacekeeping, we can rely on his special reps to negotiate the technical details that the big powers now are pushing their clients to get rid of and solve. So it was partly Perez De Cuellar and partly the capability of the United Nations to make use of all these tools that during the Cold War were lying fallow, namely peacekeeping. At that point we had not yet reached peacemaking although the concept came up, but it hadn't actually been done, it hadn't been imposition, there hadn't been nation-building, there hadn't been, you know, humanitarian operations.

JS: Humanitarian interventions.

MB: Interventions. So the idea was ok the Americans and the Russians are ending the Cold War. That means anything is possible through the United Nations right now. If we have a problem we could use the United Nations because those guys can talk to each other. So that was the perception and that Perez De Cuellar was not an obstacle

but he was capable, competent with the staff that was appointed, capable and competent to deal with these individual issues.

JS: That was the next question. From outside did you have the impression that Perez De Cuellar had changed the internal staff to any extent that he had made a difference there?

MB: For those of us who were at the United Nations, no, it was the staff he found and in some cases it was the staff he brought in, like Alvaro.

JS: Alvaro de Soto, yes.

MB: But Diego [Cordovez] was a UN person, Brian was a UN person, Jean-Claude Aimé was a UN person. They were all UN people and then he would appoint special people from outside the United Nations when needed, but that had been done before. So it was rather that the qualified people at the United Nations were finally getting a chance to do the things that they were qualified for that the Cold War had prevented.

There is one other thing that has to be made clear: there was a general perception at the United Nations-- and you must be more aware of this than most people -- that the United Nations had successfully insulated the anti-institution elements who, because of the rule of geographical distribution, must out of necessity be given jobs there. Namely, the Russians and their satellites and their sympathizers, had been all put into a locked room and given make-work to do in the Political Department and the Conference Services Department and that the real work of International Civil Service on a neutralized basis was done by this small core of, what one might call gifted amateurs, but, of course, one knew better that they were not amateurs because they have been gifted amateurs for 35 years, at that stage.

So one had this sense that here are these people who were lean and mean and ready to roll and unencumbered by the ideology of either the Americans, because the Americans among them like George Sherry, were not political nor the Russians. Now we know that's not true now, but that was the sense then, you knew basically that that was an anti-Soviet operation, that people like Brian Urquhart, himself, would say about Henry Kissinger that his big mistake was letting the Russians into the Middle East. So you have to realize that these people were as anti-Soviet as the next person and were simply efficient but not really non-ideological.

JS: That's right. I can tell you that is absolutely right.

MB: But you see at that time one didn't have that sense. It's only in retrospect. I think that one got the sense that the entire special political operation was an anti-Soviet operation to try to get good governance instead of political decision-making into the international process.

JS: That's why what was then PSCA, Political and Security Council Affairs Department never had any role in peacekeeping. Brian Urquhart prevented that totally.

MB: Not only that but also the communications people. The Russians were never allowed into the Communications staff, which was not just for peacekeeping but was





universal for the entire Secretariat. They were a couple of other small departments that functioned in that non-ideological/ideological way. And that was not to reconcile the East and the West but to isolate the East and allow the West to do its business.

JS: Yes, and you recognized from outside that this particular Secretary-General did rely heavily on a relatively small group of people and were the ones to be trusted, right?

MB: And they were all westerners, including people like James Jonah who was more Oxford than Sierra Leone.

JS: That's all I am going to keep you for.

MB: I left the UN at that time.



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