

PEACEMAKER

ALSO BY THANT MYINT-U

*The Hidden History of Burma: Race, Capitalism, and the
Crisis of Democracy in the 21st Century*

*Where China Meets India: Burma and the New
Crossroads of Asia*

*The River of Lost Footsteps: A Personal History of
Burma*

The Making of Modern Burma

PEACEMAKER



U THANT AND THE
FORGOTTEN QUEST FOR
A JUST WORLD

THANT MYINT-U



W. W. NORTON & COMPANY

Independent Publishers Since 1923

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Printed in the United States of America

First Edition

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For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact
W. W. Norton Special Sales at specialsales@wnnorton.com or 800-233-4830

Manufacturing by Lakeside Book Company

Book design by Dana Sloan

Production manager: Louise Mattarelliano

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

ISBN 978-1-324-05197-8

W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 500 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10110
www.wwnorton.com

W. W. Norton & Company Ltd., 15 Carlisle Street, London W1D 3BS

\$PrintCode

For BG

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NOTE TO READERS

This book follows the usage of proper names as they were commonly rendered in English from the late 1950s through the early 1970s. For example, “Peking” is used instead of “Beijing.” I have also used terms prevalent at the time, such as “Third World” rather than the more recent “Global South.” Additionally, Vietnamese names appear without diacritics for readability and consistency with most English-language sources of the era. While this simplifies presentation, it does not reflect the full accuracy of Vietnamese orthography.

Through these choices, I have tried to maintain historical authenticity while avoiding unnecessary distractions.

PEACEMAKER

PROLOGUE

THE FORMER BEATLE WAS wearing a brown polka-dot jacket with a black turtleneck, and little round sunglasses. “Say, could you tell me how to get a ticket to this lunch? Nobody sent me one and I don’t know where to sit.”

It was around noon on a cold and rainy mid-December day in 1971 and John Lennon had just arrived with Yoko Ono at the Pierre Hotel in New York for a luncheon. “We’re not snobs,” said Lennon. “We don’t mind mixing with the straights.” A startled young woman at the reception desk quickly replied that the couple would be seated on the dais with U Thant, Governor Rockefeller, Pete Seeger, Senator Frank Church, Arthur Goldberg, and Jacques Cousteau. No ticket was required.¹

The lunch was a farewell tribute to Thant, who was about to step down after more than a decade as Secretary-General of the United Nations. Thant, who was Burmese, had, like many of his compatriots, only a single personal name; the “U” was an honorific roughly meaning “mister.”

Dorothy Hammerstein, wife of the Broadway lyricist Oscar Hammerstein, had organized funding for the event, attracting contributions from dozens of Thant’s friends, including Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, Walter Lippmann, John D. Rockefeller, and a mix of corporate and union donors, such as the Woolworth Company and the Amalgamated Laundry Workers.

Lennon and Ono were ushered into the chandeliered ballroom where they and nearly six hundred other guests sipped wine, ate canapés, and chatted amiably: American congressmen, bankers and captains of industry, Hollywood moguls, peace activists, ambassadors, and top UN officials. There was Myrna Loy, star of the silver screen, Jacqueline Wexler, a former nun who had fought against Vatican authority, Robert Wagner, the three-term mayor of New York, Barbara Ward, a distinguished economist and early campaigner for sustainable development, and Burgess Meredith, who had recently played the Penguin in the TV series *Batman*.

Also in the crowd was Victor Lessiovski, a KGB agent (codename: Fedora) and one of Thant's special assistants. The FBI believed they had turned the spy years ago. In fact, the supposed double agent was still working for Moscow and feeding disinformation about the UN directly to the White House.²

"U Thant works for peace and so do we," Lennon told Sally Quinn, a reporter for *The Washington Post*. "Besides, if we want to take over the establishment, we have to find out how it works."

Lennon and Ono were introduced to Thant, the world's preeminent diplomat and the first non-European to head an international organization.

"I've been following your activities. You've got a hard job," Lennon said respectfully.

"I've been following your activities too," replied the jovial sixty-two-year-old as he puffed on a Cuban Partagas cigar. Thant, a regular watcher of *The Ed Sullivan Show* on Sunday nights, explained that he had seen the Beatles on television and had been delighted to find Lennon's name on the guest list.

The event had been organized by the World Federalist Movement, founded in the 1930s by suffragists and now directed by Norman Cousins—the influential former editor of the *Saturday Review*, a staunch opponent of the Vietnam War, and an ally of Thant's. The World Federalists were committed to what they called a "Human Manifesto" and pledged themselves "Planetary Citizens." They wanted a world free of "divisions and

was between men” and believed that only a stronger United Nations was “capable of governing our planet in the common human interest.” Distinguished men and women from many fields joined together to support this vision of a closer human community, including Coretta Scott King, the composer Leonard Bernstein, the architect Buckminster Fuller, the mountaineer Edmund Hillary, the musician Yehudi Menuhin, the playwright Arthur Miller, the writer Kurt Vonnegut, the scientist C. P. Snow, the historian Arnold Toynbee, the explorer Thor Heyerdahl, and even the Dalai Lama.³

Over a hundred people, including scores of presidents and prime ministers who could not attend the event in person, sent telegrams, and these were printed out and stapled together for each guest.⁴ A message from the Nobel laureate Linus Pauling described the Secretary-General as “one of the greatest men of the Twentieth Century.” The folk singer Joan Baez sent a simple missive: “Love and gratitude to you—and wishing you and all of us strength for the struggle which seems to continually lie ahead of us and let there be joy in that struggle.”

Lunch was followed by a dessert of Strawberry Delight and a musical tribute by Pete Seeger, who sang “Where Have All the Flowers Gone?” and “Jacob’s Ladder,” during which he encouraged everybody to sing along. New York governor Nelson Rockefeller, Norman Cousins, Barbara Ward, and Jacques Cousteau made brief remarks before Thant took a final puff on his cigar and walked to the podium.

In a charcoal pinstripe suit, the diplomat from Burma explained how he had worked to “harmonize” the attitudes of governments around the world and give priority to “the human factor.” He was, he said, a conservative Buddhist who valued “modesty, humility, love, a live-and-let-live attitude,” and, most of all, “understanding the other man’s point of view.” Over his decade at the helm, the spirit of internationalism had been kept alive, Thant declared. But global crises were now coming in “dangerously rapid succession.” Patriotism was fine, but an additional allegiance, to the entire world community, was now essential.

Warming to his theme, he put aside his notes and said, “We have to learn a great deal . . . but far more importantly, we have to *unlearn* a great



Thant with John Lennon and Yoko Ono at his retirement party, December 1971.

deal. We have to unlearn a lot of dogma . . . to get rid of that very bad concept of ‘my country, right or wrong.’”

As the assembled guests applauded and rose to their feet, Norman Cousins handed Thant a copy of the “Human Manifesto” and declared Thant “Planetary Citizen Number One.”

During Thant’s speech, Lennon was seen whispering to Ono before handing a little note to Seeger. When the speech was over, Seeger passed Lennon his guitar. Lennon sang a song he had recently written about peace and which, he said, he had never performed before in America: “It’s called ‘Imagine.’”

A beaming Thant said the event was the most moving in his career.

Until he was nearly forty years old, Thant was a schoolteacher in a small backwater town in Burma, then part of the British Empire. When his country became independent in 1948, he joined government service, ini-

tially as a spokesman, and in less than a decade found himself at the very center of global politics as Burma's ambassador to the UN, living in midtown Manhattan. In 1961, during the coldest years of the Cold War, with the UN on the edge of collapse, he emerged as the only person in the world acceptable to both Moscow and Washington as Secretary-General. He would be on the front lines of nearly every major global conflict until 1972—often caught on the horns of an impossible decision.

In 1967, a Gallup poll ranked Thant the sixth most admired man in the world, just behind Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy and ahead of Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan. In the early 1960s he had pulled the UN back from bankruptcy, battled white supremacist mercenaries in the Congo, and, in 1962, mediated a peaceful end to the Cuban Missile Crisis. All this had won him widespread acclaim (except from some on the British and American right), as did his success in securing a ceasefire during the 1965 India–Pakistan War.

But Thant was also an intensely controversial figure. In the years following that poll, his unrelenting efforts to end the fighting in Vietnam, on terms very different from those desired by Lyndon Johnson's White House, made him an enemy of many in the American national security establishment. His decision to withdraw UN peacekeepers from Gaza and the Sinai on the eve of the Six-Day War and his later diplomacy, aimed at a peace based on an Israeli withdrawal from the recently occupied territories, drew further ire, even from those in the US and the UK who had been sympathetic to his stance on Vietnam. The UN's inability to address the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia or the famines and bloodshed in Biafra and Bangladesh, together with its admission of Communist China, further sapped support for Thant and the world organization.

In much of the rest of the world, Thant was seen as a tireless champion for the rights of the newly independent states of Africa and Asia. From the mid-1950s, their leaders had transformed the UN, fighting for a global peace based on racial equality and the equality of nations. Thant doggedly stood up for their hard-won sovereignty and pushed for the rapid economic development he believed was the best antidote to future insta-

bility. His tough rhetoric against apartheid and white domination across southern Africa, disparaged by many in Western countries, was universally applauded in what was then known as the Third World. Toward the end of his tenure, he became a strident advocate for environmental protection and a critic of what he considered unsustainable consumerism. In one of his last acts, he helped prepare the groundwork for the first Earth Summit in Stockholm.

Two weeks after the lunch at the Pierre, Thant retired, then virtually disappeared from history. A central figure in averting nuclear catastrophe during the Cuban Missile Crisis, Thant is almost nowhere to be found in popular or even scholarly accounts of those pivotal events. There is no Hollywood film featuring the Burmese Secretary-General and his Indian and Egyptian deputies mediating between John F. Kennedy, Nikita Khrushchev, and Fidel Castro. This first generation of non-white peacemakers on the world stage has been almost entirely forgotten.

There was once a faith in a new internationalism, which could remake the world after empire, bring about a permanent peace, and create a fairer global economy.

This book is the story of a man and a portrait of that time.

1

NEW WORLD

IN A RENTED FIFTH-FLOOR apartment in Manhattan's well-heeled Lenox Hill neighborhood, the heavy beige curtains partly drawn to let in the morning light, the slim, middle-aged Burmese diplomat, dressed in a crisp white shirt and gray wool trousers, sat down to his usual morning meal of scrambled eggs, bacon, and toast. Just a few years before, in the shaded calm of his ocher-colored bungalow in Rangoon, breakfast would have been a bowl of piping hot fish soup, fragrant with ginger, turmeric, and lemongrass. On this morning, September 18, 1961, his Zenith radio crackled with troubling news—of Soviet atomic tests in the deserts of central Asia and simmering tensions in a divided Berlin. Outside, the hum of traffic rose steadily along 72nd Street, punctuated by bursts of car horns and the occasional wail of a siren, the city already in full swing. Thant could feel the pace of change accelerating, for himself and for the planet.'

For much of his life, Thant had been a teacher and later the headmaster of a school in his hometown of Pantanaw, a sprawl of muddy streets, mango trees, and teak houses in Burma's steamy and mosquito-infested Irrawaddy delta. Yet he dreamed of an existence beyond his remote little town. He mastered English on his own, read everything he could on British and world history, and penned a steady stream of essays for the local papers on the politics of the time. Once, when he was probably in his late thirties and aspiring to a more cosmopolitan life, he had a studio photo-

graph taken, wearing a dark English suit as he sat at a polished wooden table, with a painted background intended to look as if he were in a grand European parlor. When Burma gained independence from Britain in 1948, he moved with his family to the capital, Rangoon, where he joined the new administration and rose quickly to become a senior civil servant.

It wasn't an easy path. When Thant was fifteen, his father died and the once well-to-do family found itself suddenly impoverished, which limited educational prospects for the bookish young man. The other top mandarins, nearly all educated at Oxford or Cambridge, looked down on him for his lack of even a provincial university degree. He had to prove himself, and this meant working twice as hard as the others—without making enemies.

His wife, Thein Tin, wanted him to succeed. She kept him on an even keel and, as a devout Buddhist, frequently reminded him of the value of equanimity and the impermanence of all things. When they had first met, Thant was in his early twenties and Thein Tin eleven years older. Originally from a town near Mandalay, in Upper Burma, she had moved to Pantanaw with her mother several years before, after the death of her father, and was managing her own successful cigar factory. Burma at the time was a male-dominated colonial society where men often married women far younger, but the young Thant was attracted to the experienced, independent businesswoman. Thein Tin had little interest in marrying and had rejected at least a couple of previous suitors. But Thant persisted, stopping by the house she shared with her mother, making conversation, often with his future mother-in-law, nearly every evening for years before Thein Tin finally agreed to be his wife. Their first child, a boy named Maung Bo, died from a respiratory ailment when he was a toddler. Two more children soon followed: a daughter, Aye Aye Thant, and a son, Tin Maung Thant, or Timmy.

In the mid-1950s, Thant, as chief advisor, began to travel with Burma's prime minister U Nu on official trips around the world. For both, the travels were an education in global politics. In discussions with Mao Tse-tung and Chou En-lai in Peking, they learned about China's fear of Western encirclement. In Moscow, they were hosted by Khrushchev,

whom they found “down-to-earth” and “with a good sense of humor.” In London, they heartily agreed with a recently retired Winston Churchill that Burma and Britain should “bury old animosities.” And in Hanoi, they found Ho Chi Minh friendly and “contagiously enthusiastic” about the “excellent” French food served.²

In 1955, Thant accompanied his prime minister on an official two-week tour across America. They watched a baseball game at Yankee Stadium, visited a Ford factory in Detroit, enjoyed a Hopi dance in Arizona, and met Alfred Hitchcock, Jimmy Stewart, and Doris Day on the set of *The Man Who Knew Too Much*.

When Thant moved to New York in 1957, as Burma’s ambassador to the United Nations, his wife and children had never before been abroad. They first stayed at the Adams Hotel on 86th Street and regularly ate at a Chinese restaurant several blocks away, the only place where they could find anything remotely similar to Burmese cuisine. For six months, Thant tried to find a place to live, only to be turned down by ten buildings, “because I am an Asian,” he supposed.³

Thant and his family were part of a wave of people coming from Asia and Africa to represent their countries at the UN. Nearly all faced housing challenges, as did the organization’s own non-white staff. When the UN headquarters was being built in the late 1940s, the new Peter Cooper Village downtown was considered a possible solution. But the residential development was owned by the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, which effectively barred non-whites—its president, Frederick Ecker, stated publicly that “negroes and whites don’t mix.”⁴ The UN then made a deal with Parkway Village in Queens, offering housing to any staff or diplomats facing discrimination.

Parkway Village was not an option for Thant. As an ambassador, he needed to be reasonably close to his office, the Burmese diplomatic mission at 888 Madison Avenue, as well as to the UN. Eventually, he found an apartment in a building at the corner of 72nd Street and Park Avenue, which was also home to diplomats from Iran and Niger. His friend Mongi Slim, the Tunisian ambassador, lived downstairs.

Thein Tin spoke no English. In New York, she tried English lessons

but soon gave up. Still, she was happy in the city, hosting Burmese friends for overnight stays, and relieved to be far away from Burma's increasingly feverish politics and armed rebellions. In cat eye glasses, her graying hair in a tight bun, and always in Burmese dress, she explored fabric shops for material to make Burmese-style clothes and bought shirts for her husband at Macy's and Alexander's. On weekends, Thant made sure to limit social events to ones in which Thein Tin could participate—not swanky cocktail parties on the UN circuit, but informal meals at the homes of American acquaintances who had lived in Burma.

Thant relished the UN's vibrant social scene. Back in Pantanaw, he and Thein Tin rarely got past the corner of their little street when taking an evening stroll, as Thant stopped to chat with every neighbor they saw. Now it was an endless round of cocktail parties and black-tie receptions, and lunches with journalists as well as diplomats, often at Danny's Hideaway, a steakhouse on Lexington and 45th Street adorned with photos of John Wayne and other Hollywood celebrities who had eaten there.

Still, Thant preferred to be home for dinner. First thing every morning, as if it was a Burmese open-air market, Thein Tin shopped for food at the grocery store on 86th Street, and then prepared elaborate meals of beef or chicken curry, usually cooked with a paste of onions, garlic, ginger, and cayenne pepper, together with rice, sour soups, and spicy salads. Ingredients not readily available on the Upper East Side or even Chinatown, such as pickled tea, were brought by a steady stream of visitors from Rangoon.⁵

Now fifty-three years old and a rising star at the UN, Thant hoped to be a bridge between a West he had long admired and countries like Burma, newly independent and eager to carve out a place in the world. He had little desire to return to Rangoon anytime soon, where festering political tensions fed into rumors of an imminent army coup. A keen swimmer, he had recently signed up for a five-year membership at the nearest branch of Vic Tanny's fitness chain, where there was a pool.⁶

On that overcast morning of September 18, 1961, as Thant and his fam-

ily were starting their day, a familiar voice from WNYC reported on the Yankees' dramatic twelfth-inning victory over the Detroit Tigers. Thant preferred to watch boxing on television; baseball was a game he barely understood. But then came the news that froze him: several hours earlier, the *Albertina*, a DC-6 transport plane carrying United Nations Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld together with his aides and crew, had gone missing somewhere over the forests of central Africa.

Hammarskjöld was on a mission to end brutal fighting in the newly independent Congo. The big powers—the Americans, the Soviets, the British, and the French—were backing different sides in what was becoming a complex struggle. All wanted a piece of the Congo pie and had wildly divergent ideas on what the UN should do. The Soviets supported Patrice Lumumba, the lanky, bespectacled, thirty-five-year-old head of the new Congo government—but opposed the peacekeeping operation he had requested, for which the United Nations had already deployed thousands of blue-helmeted troops, soldiers from as far afield as Morocco and Malaya, into the country. The Americans, while supporting the peacekeepers, had helped overthrow Lumumba in late 1960, judging the Congolese leader to have drifted too close to Moscow. The British and the French, meanwhile, were conspiring with the Belgians—who for decades had ruled the vast central African nation, nearly equal in size to all of Western Europe, with almost unimaginable cruelty—to keep the southern region of Katanga, with its fabulously lucrative copper mines, under de facto European control.⁷

For the past four years, Thant had been representing his country on a range of issues, from nuclear disarmament to decolonization. The Congo was his biggest concern. The Burmese ambassador knew that the crisis in the heart of Africa was pulling the UN apart and might soon leave it weak and irrelevant on the international stage. That would be disastrous, especially for the smaller countries like Burma that saw the global body as their best, perhaps their only, hope for a peaceful and prosperous future.

Within minutes, Thant was in his official navy blue Buick, the “DPL” plates marking him as a diplomat. Herman, his wiry young driver from

Brooklyn, navigated rush hour traffic with practiced precision, weaving past the tenement buildings along Second Avenue and cutting across 45th Street. Soon, the gleaming concrete and glass towers of United Nations headquarters came into view. The Buick glided past the fluttering flags of over a hundred nations, their colors vivid under the gray sky, before descending into the building's vast subterranean parking garage along the East River.

In times of crisis, the best place to go was the Delegates' Lounge. There was the gently sloping General Assembly Hall, where presidents and prime ministers delivered their speeches every autumn, and the Security Council chamber, where ambassadors, sometimes in emergency sessions, convened around a horseshoe-shaped table to debate and decide on pressing matters of war and peace. The Delegates' Lounge was where the informal action took place: the nerve center for gossip, off-the-record conversations, and, sometimes, secret deals. With its well-stocked bar, Danish designer chairs and Finnish standing lamps, an enormous world map, and floor-to-ceiling windows, the lounge looked the perfect location for a Hollywood spy thriller. It had been the setting, just three years before, for an early scene in Alfred Hitchcock's *North by Northwest*.

When Thant arrived, the vast room, about seventy yards long, was already crowded with men in flannel suits of every nationality, cigarette smoke drifting through the air and a loudspeaker gently paging diplomats in different languages. The Americans tended to monopolize two sofas at one end. The Soviets and their Communist satellites huddled a comfortable distance away. A bank of wooden telephone booths stood ready nearby.

With his browline glasses and dark hair slicked back from a high forehead, Thant was a familiar face in the lounge. His closest colleagues were the other Afro-Asian ambassadors, including the Oxford-educated, jazz-loving Ghanaian Alex Quaison-Sackey, the rotund Egyptian lawyer Omar Loutfi, who had helped draft the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the pencil-mustached Tunisian Mongi Slim, whose accomplishments included the installation of the Delegates' Lounge espresso machine, one of the few in Manhattan at the time.⁸

Toward the end of the Second World War, Franklin D. Roosevelt imagined a United Nations at the center of a new international order, one in which five allies—the United States, the United Kingdom, France, the Soviet Union, and China—would together police the world. Then, the Cold War turned allies into adversaries and within a few years of the UN's establishment in 1945, commentators were predicting its early death.

There were, however, other ideas, linked to visions of rejuvenated European empires, about what the world body might achieve. Jan Christian Smuts, the longtime prime minister of South Africa and one of the drafters of the UN Charter, was both a committed imperialist and a staunch supporter of apartheid. During the drafting of the charter in San Francisco, he praised the UK as the greatest colonial power in the world and imagined a future in which the British Empire would be remade as the British Commonwealth with its white dominions, such as South Africa and Australia, at its core. The non-white colonies would take their places further down the racial hierarchy, Communism would be contained, and existing networks of trade and profits reinforced.⁹ The UN would set an overall framework within which a racially ordered Commonwealth could thrive. “Men and women everywhere,” he said, “including dependent peoples, still unable to look after themselves, are thus drawn into the vast plan to prevent war.”¹⁰

India's representative, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, the sister of prime minister and independence leader Jawaharlal Nehru, denounced Smuts's “Nazi doctrine” and warned that a race-based “new world order” could lead only to “conflict and ultimate disaster.” Though at the time, fewer than a dozen of the UN's members were from Asia and Africa, they managed to push through the UN's General Assembly (in which each country has one vote and no state has a veto) a resolution challenging Smuts's contention that racial segregation was a path to stability. Many in London, Paris, and Brussels, as well as Pretoria, were appalled.

Pandit's intervention against racism was a taste of what was to come.

In April 1955, over three hundred delegates from twenty-nine Asian and African governments, representing half the world's population, gathered in Bandung, a hill town in Indonesia. No such meeting had ever happened before. The conference was organized by Burma, India, Pakistan, and Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) along with Indonesia, which a few years before had won a bloody war of independence against the Netherlands. The delegates present, Communists and anti-Communists, republicans and monarchists, had little in common except a shared experience of racial humiliation. The Mau Mau massacres in Kenya were fresh in the minds of many, as well as the recent bloody crackdown in Nyasaland (now known as Malawi) and the vicious subjugation of the black majority in South Africa.

By late 1960, UN membership had ballooned to nearly a hundred, with seventeen new African nations admitted in that year alone. Until then, the US and Western European governments had held sway in the General Assembly, where Washington could usually count on the backing of pliant Latin American regimes. The Afro-Asians were now close to a majority, and they regularly joined forces with countries like Yugoslavia, Ireland, and Sweden that were similarly “neutral” in the Cold War. As the Americans and Soviets competed for their votes, the Afro-Asians came to believe that the future of the UN was increasingly in their hands. They saw no reason for a Cold War and the buildup of atomic arsenals. They were impatient and ambitious and envisaged a post-imperial age that would see the rapid economic development of the poorer nations. Their prime targets were colonialism and white supremacy.

In December 1960, after weeks of high-level negotiation, the Afro-Asians, including Thant and his Burmese delegation, managed to secure overwhelming support for a declaration calling for “the transfer of all powers” from the colonizers to the colonized “without any conditions or reservations.” There was a mood of celebration and anticipation as they put forth their demand for the end of empire. What they wanted first and foremost was an international system which ensured that their hard-won independence was real and irreversible: at its heart would be

a United Nations that would belong not just to the white nations but to the entire world.

Thant had been an organizer of the Bandung conference, and from 1957, in his speeches as Burma's ambassador to the UN, he dismissed the notion that a "balance of terror" between the superpowers could bring about a lasting peace. Instead, he pushed for an end to atomic testing, challenging not just the Soviets and the Americans but also the French, who had just exploded their first nuclear weapon in the Sahara Desert. "To the peoples of Asia and Africa," he said at the UN, "the atomic bomb is something more than a fearsome instrument of terror . . . it represents the white man's instrument of terror, having only been used once in war, by whites against a non-white race."¹¹

His view, like that of many of his Afro-Asian colleagues, was that the



Afro-Asian leaders at the UN, October 1960 (left to right): Prime Minister Saeb Salaam of Lebanon, President Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt, President Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, (then Ambassador) Thant of Burma, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru of India, and President Sukarno of Indonesia.

arms race should be replaced by a single-minded focus on economic development. He reasoned that “the means and the knowledge” now existed to industrialize the poorer ex-colonial nations and that this would be “the most constructive and exciting venture of all time.”

Thant also focused on Algeria, where hundreds of thousands had died and millions were forcibly displaced in fighting between the National Liberation Front (FLN) and French colonial troops.¹² Burma had no historic relationship with Algeria, but Thant accepted the chairmanship of the Afro-Asian committee working in solidarity with the FLN, in addition to that of the Congo Conciliation Commission, a similar grouping of Afro-Asian ambassadors. He carefully negotiated resolutions affirming Algeria’s right to independence and labeling French atrocities against Algerian civilians a clear breach of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Genocide Convention.¹³ The choice, Thant stated, was between negotiations and an “intensification of the war.” Lakhdar Brahimi, a young FLN diplomat, believed that Thant’s efforts provided an all-important morale boost at a pivotal moment in his country’s fight for freedom.¹⁴

Thant identified as an Afro-Asian neutralist but prided himself on not being a radical. In negotiating for Algeria, he did not see himself as anti-French. On the contrary, he felt certain that it was in France’s own interest to end colonial rule. His intention, he explained, was “to help France by helping the Algerian cause.”¹⁵ He vigorously supported decolonization but equally supported the best possible relations between the newly independent states and the Western democracies. In this, he found common cause with the European diplomats whose governments were most committed to the UN, such as the Irish ambassador Patrick Boland and Sweden’s Agda Rössel, the first woman representative at the world body. They too were habitués of the Delegates’ Lounge.

Dag Hammarskjöld, an economist from an aristocratic Swedish family, had been the UN’s Secretary-General for eight years—the organization’s chief administrative officer, the head of its Secretariat. The big