

United Nations Oral History Project

**Walter Beeley
20 June 1990**

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YUN TAPE
MR. WALTER BEELEY
LONDON, ENGLAND
JUNE 20, 1990
INTERVIEWER: SUTTERLIN

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JSS Mr. Beeley, first I want to thank you very much for agreeing to give a little time to this program of Yale University for an oral history of the United Nations. If we may, I would like first to begin with a discussion of the 1956 war in the Middle East, and I would like to ask you to indicate what was your position at that time.

WB I was an Under Secretary in the Foreign Office at that time. We had two Under Secretaries for the Middle East. I was not the one dealing with either Israel or Egypt. My responsibilities were further east including Iraq, Iran and the Arabian peninsula. My colleague, the other Middle Eastern Under Secretary, dealt with the events in North Africa, including both Israel and Egypt. When the crisis broke he was the official directly in charge. I frankly went on leave about that time for a few days. And then I had to come back because my colleague suffered rather under the strain and had to rest for a few days so I took over from him, oh, I suppose, after the fighting stopped, but not long after.

JSS Then I have to assume, from what you said, that you were not then involved actually in the consultations, if we can call them that, between the British, the French and eventually

the Israeli authorities?

WB Hardly any officials from the Foreign Office were. I don't know, a half dozen perhaps, at the most. I certainly was not one of them.

JSS And it came as a surprise then, when revealed?

WB Yes, it did.

JSS Because I believe that is also true in New York, at the United Nations.

WB I knew about it for two hours before the British public knew about it, because I invited one of the French on the day of the ultimatum I think. The French Prime Minister and Foreign Minister were in London and one of their staff was a person I knew, so I rang him and had him come and have a drink with me here and he told me about the ultimatum, I suppose, four or five hours before it was on the radio.

JSS Because one of the questions I wanted to ask you, given your position, it is a very relevant question because you were involved with the other countries in the area, this policy of the British government at this point to in fact deal directly with Israel marked a complete turnaround from the earlier policies of the British government at the time of the establishment of Israel which was one of standing off for many years. How do you explain that?

WB Primarily a matter of personalities. Bevin was very much opposed to the creation of a Jewish state and of course he had to accept it when it happened but the trend of our

policy at this time was very much a close feeling of relationship with the Arabs as a buffer against potential Soviet expansion in the Middle East. Now, I think Eden-- this was many years later, of course--had personally a more sympathetic attitude to Israel than Bevin had and of course Eden was outraged by the Egyptian action on the Canal. It was the French that originally brought the Israelis into the discussions. Including Israel was part of, one of the necessities of, acting with the French. There were all those factors.

JSS And it was the French who actually established the contact with Shiman Peres? He came into the picture through the French?

WB Yes, I believe so.

JSS You mentioned the fear of Soviet expansion. I would like to digress just a minute to ask you a question in this regard. Not too long ago I interviewed Mr. Abba Eban, and discussed with him the question why did the Soviets take such a strong position in favor of the establishment of Israel.

WB What did he say?

JSS Well, he said he thought that it was purely strategic, that it was a decision on the part of Stalin personally and that Stalin was concerned about the surrounding of the Soviet Union, but at that time it was the British rather than the Americans he was concerned about. And Eban's interpretation was that Stalin considered if he could get Palestine out of

British influence permanently, this was advantageous strategically, and that was the only thing. I would be interested in your views.

WB I would say they are very nearly the same. Eban is a man whom I have great admiration for, and his judgements on these matters are generally good. I have always thought the Russian attitude was motivated primarily by the desire to get us out of Palestine. They saw their chances of getting rid of British presence in Palestine if the United Nations acted as it in fact did. UN participation was necessary to bring that about. That is my interpretation. After they achieved that, they changed sides pretty fast.

JSS Plus the fact that it was known that Stalin himself was not well disposed toward Zionism, or for that matter, toward the Jews in the Soviet Union.

WB Yes.

JSS But to go back to the '56 war, what was the reaction on the British side to the Dulles decision to stop aid for the Aswan Dam? How did you consider this?

WB Actually there has been a good deal of misinterpretation on this, I think, in some of the writing about it. There was no conflict between London and Washington on this question. We came to the same conclusion. I think we took a little longer to do it, but I took part in those discussions at the official level in London and I think I was the only dissenter in the interdepartmental meeting which decided not

to go ahead with the Aswan agreement. I read recently the minute which I wrote after that meeting expressing my regret that we had taken that decision. But that had become by then British as well as American policy. I think the main grievance that the British had at that time was the manner in which Dulles disclosed the change in plans, with his rather offensive remarks to the Egyptian Ambassador, upset us a little.

JSS So there was no inclination to blame the whole ultimate tragedy on this decision of Dulles?

WB No.

JSS I have brought a little quotation from Eden's memoirs, I think it is, in which he said "We assumed that the American attitude, that is, toward British-French action, was one of prudence rather than one of divergence." It is certainly true that Eden had informed Eisenhower that the British side must be ready to use force to bring Nasser to his senses.

WB That is true.

JSS There was this much advance information to the Americans, but the Americans did not understand that to mean . . .

WB It was some time earlier and I imagine the Americans didn't feel that it related necessarily to the context in which action was going to be taken.

JSS So you feel it is understandable that the Americans reacted as they did with surprise . . . as if they had not really been consulted?

WB They weren't. They were deliberately deceived, I think. But of course one of the paradoxes of the situation is that when, I think it was, Murphy called in the British and French Ambassadors in Washington to try to find out what was going on, he knew more or less what was going on. The American government had all sorts of evidence including communications between London and posts in the eastern Mediterranean and Murphy knew all about that when he sent for the Ambassadors. But they hadn't a clue.

JSS Well, in New York the British and French Ambassadors were involved in rather serious discussions with the Secretary-General at that point also, I believe. Or was that a little earlier?

WB That was earlier. That was during or after the Security Council meeting in October. I was there, I went with Selwyn Lloyd to those meetings and Hammarskjöld had convened I don't know how many private meetings with Pineau and Lloyd and Fawzi, the Egyptian Foreign Minister, which made a certain amount of progress and they agreed when the Security Council ended that they would meet again. I don't know if they fixed a date, but in the quite near future, but they would all meet again, I think, in Geneva. When Lloyd returned from New York to London at the end of the Security Council meeting he thought he was on the road to a peaceful solution. He found when he got back that Eden had meanwhile been involving himself more deeply with the French and was

off on a totally different line.

JSS And as a result of this I believe Hammarskjold felt especially betrayed.

WB Yes, I suppose he did, but I don't believe Lloyd had any intention of deceiving Hammarskjold. I think Lloyd seriously thought that there was hope of a peaceful solution. When Lloyd got back he phoned up and asked what I was doing that evening. I told him and he said I'd like to see you, can you come around. So I went around and he, as I said, had just flown back the same afternoon, and we talked for a bit of a while and I said "Aren't you tired?" and he said "Tired, that would be frivolous."

JSS A wonderful story. Did he, on that occasion, express some of his concerns?

WB Yes he did, I remember sending him a telegram about the Congo problem from London.

JSS And then, when the secession of Katanga occurred quite soon, what was the British reaction to this, I mean Tshombe, how was he viewed?

WB I don't know. I wasn't in London and I wasn't dealing, apart from the few meetings with the Security Council, I wasn't personally responsible for dealing with the Congo. I think Hammarskjold had rather a soft spot for Tshombe that I remember feeling.

JSS Which brings me to a much later question and you probably were not at all involved, but Connor Cruise O'Brien, the

Irishman who had very grave doubts about Hammarskjold's motivation, was there a particular British view about him, about Connor Cruise O'Brien?

WB I can't say there was a British view. I think we didn't take him very seriously. We never regarded him as a major figure in the Congo.

JSS Although, to continue the point, at the end of the story almost, Hammarskjold on his last trip to the Congo, did not go to Elizabethville because there had been a lot of disturbances there, and in fact, Connor Cruise O'Brien had announced the end of the secession of Kantanga. And when Hammarskjold got to Leopoldville the British Ambassador, who was fairly new there, actually protested to the Secretary-General about the action being taken in Elizabethville.

WB Now who would that be?

JSS He had just gotten there and I think his name has been mistranscribed. Let me see.

WB It wasn't Scotly?

JSS No, no. It is transcribed here, but I think it is wrong, as Derek Riches.

WB That may be right. I had forgotten when he went down. Derek Riches, that's the name of a rather distinguished British diplomat of that time. I had forgotten he had been there.

JSS Yes, he was just assigned and had just gotten there and apparently the British side was very disturbed by what was

happening in Elizabethville and so protested. But my question, and I suspect you were not directly involved here, did the British who made the arrangements for Dag Hammarskjold to fly to Ndola in order to meet Tshombe have some special insight as to why Hammarskjold wanted to go outside of the Congo in order to meet with Tshombe?

WB I can't say. What sort of plane, a Swedish plane?

JSS It was a UN plane, but it had a Swedish crew. A lot of mistakes were made because the UN plane had been used the day before and had not been serviced properly; it had been shot at in Katanga and there are a lot of questions as to why the plane was used without further servicing and so on. But, the question really in the back of my mind here is--we mentioned Connor Cruise O'Brien--was it the Secretary-General's desire to avoid having O'Brien present?

WB Quite possibly. I can't say any more than that, I don't think anyone can.

JSS If anybody, it would have been the British because in fact they had made the arrangements for him. Can you say anything about how active the British Ambassador was in Leopoldville? The American Ambassador was quite active and also in Elizabethville, again this would have been more of a London assessment. The peace-keeping operation in the Congo was much more complicated than in the Sinai, involving political elements and involving many more troops, some of whom were not as well trained. But the question here is

what was the British overall assessment of the performance of these troops?

WB I'm sorry I can't . . . I wonder who can. Have you found any one who can answer that sort of question?

JSS We have interviewed two men who were American consuls in Elizabethville and that's where the performance was most controversial; some of the troops got out of hand there and there are people in the UN itself who can assess that. Brian Urquhart, in the tapes that he has made which have not been published, is very very critical of General Van Horn who was the commanding officer. He considered him to be a disaster.

WB There must be, of course, reports in the British special papers which are accessible, in the Ministry of Defense papers.

JSS Which reminds me of another question I want to ask you before I forget. Are there other British officials that come to your mind as being particularly knowledgeable on the Congo?

WB I knew two people who were Ambassadors, one was Ian Strunky.

JSS And is he still alive?

WB I think so. And Dayal.

JSS Dayal. He is in India.

WB You haven't seen him?

JSS No, and he can't travel very much. His nephew is now the Chef de Cabinet of the Secretary-General.

WB They are a distinguished family. There were two brothers I think. I knew Dayal much earlier.

JSS He had been Ambassador before going to the Congo. His performance in Leopoldville was much criticized by the Western Ambassadors.

WB I imagine. [inaudible] He was one able man. I'm sorry I can't remember others.

JSS Let me just ask another question with regard to New York. How close was your consultation with the US mission in connection with the Congo? Were you in very close touch?

WB No, not really. We were in close consultation with the French and the Belgians, but Cabot Lodge was taking a rather different line from the Europeans. Britain, of course, abstained on the resolution. I wanted the resolution to pass. But the Belgians were objecting to some of the language of the resolution, some of the contents, and the French and the British had no contact with their governments. It all happened in the middle of the night[inaudible]

I very much wanted the resolution to pass. Of course, in deciding to abstain there was some thought that there might be a veto--some expectation of a Russian veto. I calculated that the Russians would support the resolution and that turned out to be right.

JSS Yes.

WB I thought that was what would happen.

JSS Do you remember what the French were concerned about in the Belgian draft since ultimately the French, like the Russians, withheld their financial contributions?

WB Did they? I didn't know that.

JSS Yes, on legal grounds.

WB Did they?

JSS Yes.

WB I remember the Italians at the beginning were negative and I remember the Italian Ambassador coming around to me during the debate and apologizing because he had been told to change his mind. But I think the Americans put a great deal of pressure on Italy.

JSS They changed.

WB And they switched. I couldn't very well say I should be delighted, but I was.



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