

BBC interview with Thornburgh, regarding Thornburgh's experience as Under-secretary-general of United Nations, August 1993 (08:56)

>> Interviewer: Mr. Thornburgh, what is the best way to describe the United Nations right now?

>> Thornburgh: The United Nations is undergoing a period of tremendous change after 45 years of inactivity due to the stalemate of the Cold War. It's become much more operational in its nature with new responsibilities in the peacekeeping area and an ambitious agenda in dealing with economic and social problems around the world. Unfortunately the U.N. has not adjusted to this new role as much as it should and in many ways is doing business as usual to the detriment of achieving success in their new responsibilities.

>> Interviewer: In which ways United Nations hasn't adjusted itself to these changes?

>> Thornburgh: I spent a year at the United Nations at the request of President Bush to have an outside look at the management and administration of the organization. The United States pays about 25% of the normal costs, 30% of the peacekeeping costs, so that their interest in seeing that their contributions are wisely spent is understandable. I gave the secretary-general a comprehensive report on some of the things that I found that were troublesome, some of the reforms that he had undertaken which were being undone, and, in essence, looked at the organization's practices with an eye toward making them more effective and more efficient. Some of the examples of difficulties I found were in the personnel section. The practices in personnel even the secretary-general acknowledges to be outmoded. One of the most frequent complaints I had from managers was the amount of deadwood in the organization and the inability to fire people who were not performing well. Moreover, in certain areas, we found a great deal of featherbedding going on -- unnecessary jobs that could be reduced by the application of technology. For example, in the translation area, the continued employment of some 500 unnecessary typists wastes about \$20 million every year in the U.N. In looking at the peacekeeping operations, we asked an outside management consulting firm to give us an estimate of what kinds of savings could be realized through greater efficiency in areas such as procurement and logistical support. And McKinsey & Company, an international management consulting firm, estimated that about \$100 million a year could be saved by better management practices in that organization. That was a preliminary estimate, and we recommended

to the secretary-general that a more in-depth look be taken at this area. Other areas that are troublesome are the proliferation of unnecessary publications, the holding of worldwide conferences in a number of areas at great expense to the organization, and in the economic and social area, the overlap and duplication that exists between many of the U.N. organizations and specialized agencies. Perhaps the most glaring deficiency I found was a total lack of any ability to monitor the expenditures and activities by U.N. organizations around the world. I recommended that an independent inspector general's office be created that would have the responsibility to audit, investigate, and evaluate the activities of organizations and the individuals involved in them around the world. All of this is directed toward giving the U.N. much greater credibility particularly in the eyes of the major donors to whom the U.N. must look for the vast increase in financial support that accompanies their new operational mode.

>> Mr. Thornburgh, how would you describe the financial management of the U.N.?

>> Thornburgh: The budgeting process is unduly complicated, and the financial management in the Treasury department that our outside consultants found could be carried out at savings of some \$12 million to \$15 million a year by adopting modern techniques. But the biggest shortcoming, I think, is in the audit area, where there is, as I stated, is a total lack of any comprehensive mechanism to make sure that expenditures are being made properly and that there is a minimum of fraud, waste, and abuse in U.N. operations.

>> Interviewer: What has happened, or what has changed, after you submitted your report last year?

>> Thornburgh: My report was submitted at the request of the secretary-general at the end of my 1-year assignment. It was not well-received by the U.N. bureaucracy because it was very straightforward in its criticism of practices that I found to be unacceptable for an organization with such responsibility as the U.N. After I completed my assignment and delivered the report, I was told that all copies of it were ordered to be confiscated and in some cases even shredded so that they would not be available for examination. This seemed to me to be a very foolish response to a report requested by the secretary-general and which was intended to make the U.N. a more smoothly functioning and efficient operation.

>> Interviewer: Mr. Thornburgh, do you think that there is a future for United Nations given the new world order?

>> Thornburgh: There's no question but what -- a functioning United Nations is essential to dealing with the variety of complex problems we have around the world. I've long been a believer and supporter of the United Nations, but it makes it all the more important that these shortcomings which have been pointed out by me and by others be attended to at the very highest level. And that the idea that you should shoot the messenger who brings bad news is so prevalent within the organization is just another indication of how the status quo is in charge of day-to-day operations. I think, again, it is absolutely essential that an inspector general's office with a necessary degree of independence and expertise be appointed forthwith in order to provide not only the capability to root out fraud, waste, and abuse, but to create some deterrent capability with regard to any of the staff members who may be tempted to engage in such activity.

>> Interviewer: Mr. Thornburgh, thank you very much. I have covered the questions I had for you. Is there anything else that you find worth saying additionally?

>> Thornburgh: I would only repeat that the urgency of attending to these shortcomings within the organization and modernizing the practices that it utilizes in management and administration cannot be overstated. The U.N. is having a very difficult time financing its current operations, there are other operations that will need to be undertaken and financed, and contributing member states simply are not going to pay for the support of an organization that is run in the way that the U.N. is run now. It simply must modernize itself. It must reform itself. It must adopt management techniques that are responsive to today's needs and quit trying to do business as usual based on past practices.