Secretary or General? The UN Secretary-General in World Politics. Edited by Simon Chesterman. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007. 280p. $85.00 cloth, $29.99 paper

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Because the United Nations had a bit of a renaissance with the end of the Cold War, and because Kofi Annan was the most visible, charismatic, and complex UN Secretary-General since Dag Hammarskjöld in the 1950s and 1960s, a spate of publications have appeared in the last few years both about the recently retired occupant of the office (e.g. Traub (2006) Best Intentions; Meisler (2006) Kofi Annan) and about the secretary-generalship itself (e.g., Kille (2006) From Manager to Visionary; Gordenker (2005) Secretary General and Secretariat). Simon Chesterman’s Secretary or General? is about the office, not the man (or woman – although so far the secretaries-general have all been men). His volume is clearly the best of the lot.

Intended to provide advice to the current – and eighth – Secretary-General, South Korea’s Ban Ki Moon, Chesterman’s volume brings together an extraordinarily strong collective of scholars on the subject. Among the contributors are Brian Urquhart (probably no other man on the planet has witnessed UN secretaries-general in action more than he, having served the first Secretary-General Trygvie Lie and all of Lie’s successors until his own retirement in 1986), Shashi Tharoor, David Malone, James Cockayne, Ian Johnstone, Thomas Franck, and David Kennedy. They and their co-authors have produced a thoughtful series of articles on the political challenges confronting the office.

On April 9, 1953, the much beleaguered Lie went out to New York’s Idlewild Airport to welcome his successor Dag Hammarskjöld to what he described as “the most impossible job on this earth.” From the beginning, the Secretary-General has had the conundrum of being an international civil servant supposedly neutral in the contest among the great powers, promoting peace among those powers, doing their bidding, and also meeting the needs of the small and weak states in the most universal of international organizations. During the Cold War, Hammarskjöld,
U Thant, Kurt Waldheim, and Javier Pérez de Cuéllar found some freedom of action when superpower deadlock paralyzed UN responses to international crises. Hammarskjöld introduced the first peacekeeping mission to defuse the 1956 Suez crisis. U Thant organized a ceasefire in the India-Pakistan war at the time of Bangladeshi independence. And Pérez de Cuéllar organized the quiet diplomacy that brought sufficient US-Soviet unity to pressure Tehran and Baghdad to end the Iran-Iraq War.

However, in the current era of world politics that is neither the neat Westphalian system of dominant sovereign states operating in the anarchic outer space of international politics, nor the much vaunted communal global governance system supposedly fostered by globalization, the job description of the Secretary-General has moved to a new level of complexity. Chesterman and his colleagues ask, and try to answer, the question should the chief administrator of the United Nations be “Secretary,” in the cold bureaucratic 19th and early 20th century tradition represented by the director-generals of specialized organizations and Sir James Eric Drummond who led the League of Nations for 13 years, or “General,” by which the authors mean the premier political agent of the world organization. The answer that emerges with each scholar’s offering is that he should be the latter. The UN Secretary-General must also be prophet, norm creator, reformer, and policy engineer. But while wearing these different hats, the Secretary-General, in the view of the contributors to Secretary or General, should not get ahead of what the membership will bear.

The authors remind the reader of the many times various secretaries-general have pushed too hard, only to lose the support of one or more of the permanent members – United States, France, Russia, United Kingdom, China – and to see their projects, and often their careers, cut short. Hammarskjöld launched the first nation-building operation in the Congo, and lost the goodwill of France and the Soviet Union, initiating the first and continuing financial crisis for the United Nations. The Soviet government even attempted to replace Hammarskjöld with a three-person executive called the “troika.” Secretary-General Annan attempted constitutional reform of
the Security Council and was rejected by China, the United States, and Russia. Maybe most tragically, at the request of the Council’s permanent members, Boutros Boutros-Ghali crafted *An Agenda for Peace*, outlining an activist course for the UN that would allow it to respond to the new challenges of the post-Cold War disorder. For his effort, Boutros-Ghali earned the enmity of the US Congress and the abandonment of the American president. Implacable US opposition barred Boutros-Ghali from a desired second term, the only Secretary-General so denied.

Simon Chesterman’s volume has a number of gems within its pages. Colin Keating’s chapter describes the little understood method of selecting a Secretary-General, and he catalogues the many vetoes and quasi-vetoes cast by individual Security Council permanent members keeping highly qualified candidates from election to the post. James Cockayne and David M. Malone discuss the new “bipolarity” – no longer East-West, but North-South – that the Secretary-General must negotiate. Edward Luck takes on the critical US-UN relationship that has determined, to the frustration of all other member states, the final “success” or “failure” of most secretaries-general.

Ian Johnstone’s article touches on probably the most important yet unexpected function of the UN leader, that of norm entrepreneur. The UN Intellectual History Project pioneered by Thomas G. Weiss, Louis Emmerij, and Richard Jolly at the City University of New York’s Ralph Bunche Institute has chronicled the case for the United Nations as the incubator of grand “ideas” in international relations and global governance (e.g. *Ahead of the Curve*, 2001, Indiana University Press). Johnstone demonstrates the central role of the Secretary-General in the generation of ideas and norms now accepted generally in international discourse. These ideas include peacekeeping, nation-building, the “responsibility to protect,” and personal sovereignty.

The weaknesses in the text are few. Chesterman, by design, does not include a chapter on the Secretary-General as chief administrator of the United Nations. This is unfortunate, since much of the American – and increasingly Japanese – criticism of the Secretariat concerns its
administrative and budgetary failings. The recent Oil-for-Food Scandal and consequent Volcker Commission recommendation that a chief administrative officer be appointed seem sufficient reason to address the matter. Annan understood the concern and tried to appease US Congress beginning in 1997. While it is certainly the case that the head of the world organization has had some of his most important successes in the diplomatic world, it is also true that the Secretary-General administers a far-flung UN System with operations not only in New York City, but also in Geneva, Vienna, Nairobi, Rome, Washington, capital cities of failed states, rural communities of the world’s “South,” the headquarters of specialized agencies, and in the command posts of distant peacekeeping operations. The United Nations is more than speeches, resolutions, negotiations, and norm creation. It is also soldiers in blue helmets, aid workers in developing countries, civilian administrators, police, doctors, engineers, volunteers, de-mining experts, agronomists, and an increasingly wide variety of professions and services. It is also an actor in international environmental, development, and human rights regimes. One of the great challenges for a Secretary-General is to oversee and manage so decentralized a global system.

There is also no chapter and little discussion of the Secretary-General’s role in engaging the United Nations with international civil society. In his assessment of the Secretary-General as “leader, clerk, or policy entrepreneur,” David Kennedy notes the important reality that the United Nations now operates in an international system very different from the system immediately after World War II. In today’s world non-state actors, benign and malignant, are central to global politics. Possibly Kofi Annan’s greatest contribution to the United Nations was to begin its “democratization,” by bringing into its corridors the voices of nongovernmental organizations. A discussion of Annan’s Global Compact, the Ted Turner phenomenon, and the Cardoso Report’s recommendations that the UN encourage more non-state participation would have been helpful to understanding the full role of a contemporary Secretary-General.

To Ban Ki-Moon, Chesterman and his colleagues seem to advise: Be modest in your goals, look for political space in which you can take limited initiatives, and do what you can
without over-reaching. This is cautious, even discouraging, advice after the heady days of the early 1990s, but probably within the bounds of realism. So, in other words, be *neither* Secretary nor General, but rather be diplomat, visionary, and pragmatist. For Secretary-General Ban, these may seem good roles in the abstract, but he will find, as Lie advised, they will be the “most impossible job” to do in practice.