Peace Eludes the Peace-keepers

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When the UN Charter conference gathered in San Francisco in 1945, President Truman counseled the delegate that their task was not to make the peace of World War II, but to keep that peace once it was made. Of course, that peace will not be fully achieved until there is a settlement over Germany. But it is not this delay that has importantly affected the United Nations. Rather, repercussions from that war have burdened the world organization with responsibilities it was not equipped, nor intended, to face. Altered power relationships, the emergence of weak states from the collapse of old empires, and a frenetic emphasis on military power for security have created crisis conditions that needed peace-making before there could be effective peace-keeping. All this became particularly clear in 1967.

In that year it was demonstrated again in the Middle East that an armistice is no substitute for a settlement. The war in June became the third major conflict between Israel and the Arab states since Great Britain in 1947 gave up its League of Nations Mandate over Palestine and requested the UN to try to solve the problems in the volatile area. As was true of the first two wars, the third erupted from unsettled grievances. The fragile machinery the United Nations had created to restrain the quarreling between acknowledged cousins over the ancient land of Canaan was swept away as truce lines were changed once more by force.

In November, the unresolved dispute between Greek and Turkish ethnic groups on the island of Cyprus threatened a new explosion in the eastern Mediterranean. Placed in possible jeopardy were the UN peace-keepers who had stood between the antagonists for more than three years and efforts of UN mediators who had been trying to persuade opposing politicians to come to the conference table.

Meanwhile, the cloud of the Vietnam War, which had been hanging over all UN activity for more than two years, grew blacker as military escalation took priority over observance of the Charter principle of "peaceful settlement" of international disputes. The organization itself remained helpless in the face of the mounting death and destruction while Secretary-General Thant asked in vain for the major member—the United States—to stop bombing North Vietnam in the interest of opening the way toward peace talks.

Even if the exercise of peace-keeping alone were sufficient "to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war," the future for this United Nations function grew dimmer because of power politics. When the Soviet Union took exception to the Congo policing, the organization became deadlocked over the planning and financing for another such force. The ostensible reason for Soviet objection was that only the Security Council and not the Assembly could authorize and assess for such an operation. But political motivation was obviously behind their attitude. The USSR believed the UN Congo troops had been used against Communism. The United States held to its ground that the UN should not be restricted if there was a deadlock in the Council on peace-keeping. The Assembly had residual power to authorize international policing.

In 1967 the special Committee of 33, set up by the 19th Assembly to try to find some common ground in the disputes over creation and financing of a peace-keeping body, met and talked about the issues, but, as usual, reached no agreements. The Scandinavian countries offered standby troops for an international force if it were created. There was no effort on the part of the debtors to make up the UN's deficit by voluntary contributions. They refused to pay for past peace-keeping because of political objections. Again, when the mandate for the Cyprus force was extended by the Security Council, Secretary-General Thant, as usual, had to ask for contributions to pay for the operation.

The political division in the big power ranks over peace-keeping was in each case the obstacle to United Nations efforts to try to turn the armistices in the Middle