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AUSTRIA

Kurt WALDHEIM

Secretary General of  
the United Nations

Kurt Waldheim (pronounced VALThime) was sworn in as the fourth Secretary General of the United Nations on 22 December 1971. A career diplomat, he had served as Austria's Permanent Representative to the United Nations from 1964 to 1968 and from October 1970 until his current appointment. Between UN assignments he was Foreign Minister (January 1968 to March 1970).



(1973)

Waldheim's term as Secretary General has been distinguished by a vigorous attack on administrative problems and an energetic style of personal diplomacy. He has tried to reduce the perennial UN financial deficit by eliminating excess staff positions and ordering a 6-month freeze on hiring. Believing that the Secretary General must not lose touch with reality, Waldheim has undertaken an ambitious program of official visits that has taken him to nations on every continent, including the Soviet Union (July 1972) and the People's Republic of China (August 1972). During 1973 he took part in the Vietnam Peace Conference in Paris in February, addressed the First Session of the European Conference on Security and Cooperation (CSCE) in Helsinki in June, and attended the Algiers meeting of the Conference of Nonaligned Nations in September. In the late summer he also toured the Middle East in a fruitless effort to break the deadlock that eventually led to war.

Role of the United Nations

Waldheim strongly believes that if it is to survive, the United Nations must play an active and positive role in world affairs--and that his most important task as Secretary General is to see that it does. During a September 1972 interview,

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he asserted that the organization was at a critical point in its history, where it must either prove itself capable of significant action or sink into permanent impotence.

The United Nations cannot limit itself to social and economic matters, Waldheim insists, but must work for world peace and security, and the Secretary General must offer his services as mediator in any dispute between member states. He considers it realistic to assume that the great powers would reject such an offer--but the United Nations would have met its responsibilities, and history would place the onus of failure on the nations that refused.

Waldheim publicly disagrees with critics who dismiss the United Nations as too cumbersome and faction-ridden to intervene decisively in any conflict. He contends that its current impotence is the fault of member nations who use it as a forum for narrow nationalist squabbles, and he places much of the blame for the organization's poor record on the "great powers," who increasingly bypass it in favor of bilateral negotiations.

Making the Secretary General a  
Figure of Action and Decision

Waldheim feels that his personal diplomacy and constant lobbying for UN involvement in diverse fields are essential and that an active and decisive Secretary General can do much to restore confidence in the organization. Specifically, he feels that his own face-to-face meetings with world leaders and his official presence at regional conferences set new precedents for UN involvement.

At the same time, Waldheim feels that as spokesman for the whole organization he must be so objective that both sides will accept his mediation. A chance for constructive UN action can be lost if a Secretary General offends one of the major powers (as Waldheim feels Dag Hammerskjold did in the Congo).

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Waldheim points to his negotiations in South West Africa and Cyprus as examples of successful UN intervention. Authorized by the Security Council to negotiate with the Government of South Africa about the status of South West Africa (Namibia), the Secretary General visited Pretoria in March and November 1972. He obtained South African agreement to Namibian self-determination and to the appointment of a UN negotiator to help prepare the territory for complete independence. The Secretary General likewise feels that his June 1972 visit to Cyprus broke one of the perennial negotiating deadlocks between the Greek and Turkish communities.

At the Paris Peace Conference in February 1973 Waldheim's efforts did little to increase the United Nations' influence. The French Government proposed him for the conference chairmanship, but opposition from the People's Republic of China and North Vietnam excluded him, and later he was refused permission to take part in drafting the agreement. In his address to the conference Waldheim emphasized that he was a guest who represented no government but that his invitation to the Conference had been a gain for the United Nations. Some foreign observers viewed his exclusion from all significant activities at the Peace Conference as symptomatic of the decline in UN prestige; reports that Waldheim was disheartened by his marginal role in Paris were so widespread that he called a press conference to deny them.

#### Waldheim's Image

##### In His Own Eyes

Waldheim considers himself a hard-working man, "full of dynamism," who takes a "lively" approach to his job as Secretary General. He feels that his position requires him to be both politician and professional diplomat, working toward his goals through both quiet diplomacy--which he prefers--and public initiatives. He sees himself as a man of strong opinions, unafraid to ruffle feelings by speaking out publicly.

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In the Press

Many US journalists greeted Waldheim's selection as Secretary General with lukewarm praise, as a master of compromise rather than innovation and as the candidate least offensive to member nations. Several expressed doubt that he could stand up to pressure from the larger nations. Appraising his first year in office, however, they universally remarked on how much better Waldheim had been than they expected. Nearly all preferred his activism to the "quiet diplomacy" of his predecessor, U Thant, and they praised his budgetary and administrative reforms and his Cyprus and Namibia actions.

Detractors among the press have suggested that Waldheim has sacrificed diplomatic caution to his obsession with action. A commentator in the paper *Delegates' World* has suggested that his constant lobbying for greater use of the UN machinery in the settlement of disputes could turn member nations against it.

[ ]

A commentator said in late 1972 that working associates considered Waldheim a man of great determination and perseverance rather than of great intellect. US observers have heard far more critical comments [

] -most frequently on his tendency to rashness, which causes him to start projects and make public comments without considering their implications. At the Paris Peace Conference Waldheim exhibited this tendency to shoot from the hip by seeming to endorse the establishment of a Vietcong Liaison Office at the United Nations.

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Attitude Toward the United States

Waldheim has been considered a devoted friend of the United States. His personal cooperation was particularly effective, when he was Austrian Foreign Minister, in confidentially working out Austrian formulations acceptable to the United States covering such subjects as Vietnam, the Middle East and European security. Observers felt that his long service in the United States had given him an understanding of American thinking and foreign policy objectives.

This cordiality was strained in July 1972. Claiming that he had received private reports that US planes were bombing the dike system in North Vietnam, the Secretary General appealed to Washington to stop such activity on humanitarian grounds. He later said that the US press had distorted his statement into an accusation and that he had not necessarily believed the reports but only wanted to register his objection if dikes were being bombed.

Early Life and Career

The son of a civil servant, Kurt Waldheim was born on 21 December 1918 in St. Andrae-Woertern, Province of Lower Austria. His father was imprisoned by the Nazis during World War II. After graduating from the Consular Academy of Vienna in 1939, Waldheim studied law at the University of Vienna. During the war he served in the German Army and was wounded in the right leg. In 1944 he returned to the university and received a doctorate in law. Concurrent with his law studies, he worked as a court official, attaining the rank of assistant judge. He joined the Foreign Service in 1945 and was appointed secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs. He was at the Embassy in Paris as First Secretary from 1948 to 1951 and then served in the Foreign Office, as chief of personnel for 4 years.

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Waldheim was named Permanent Observer to the United Nations in 1955 and held the post of Permanent Representative for a few months following Austria's admission to membership that same year. In March 1956 he was appointed Ambassador to Canada. He returned to the Foreign Office in 1960 and served as head of the Political Department West (1960-62) and as director general for political affairs (1962-64).

During Waldheim's 1964-68 stint at the United Nations, he served effectively as Chairman of the Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space and as President of the First UN Conference on the Exploration and Peaceful Uses of Outer Space (1968).

In June 1970 the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Governors' Council unanimously elected Waldheim President of the Safeguards Committee. This committee dealt with the preparations of bilateral agreements between the IAEA and individual countries on the basis of Article III of the nuclear test ban treaty. Early in 1971 Waldheim made an unsuccessful bid for the Austrian Presidency, running as the candidate of the conservative People's Party.

Family

Waldheim is married to the former Elisabeth Ritschel, an attractive brunette who speaks excellent English. They met while both were studying law at the University of Vienna. The couple has three children, Liselotte (born c. 1945), Gerhard (born c. 1950) and Christa (born c. 1961). Liselotte has worked with the UN Division of Narcotics in Switzerland since 1970. She likes to call herself the "Waldheim with seniority at the UN." On 18 August 1973 Liselotte was married to Pierre Natural, the son of Albert Louis Natural, Swiss Ambassador to the PRC. Gerhard Waldheim is a graduate lawyer, who was attending Harvard Business School at the time of his sister's wedding.

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