

# Dealing with a runaway General Assembly

by William Safire

THE MOST successful diplomat operating in the world today is Salim A. Salim, ambassador to the United Nations of the United Republic of Tanzania. Who? Of where?

Ambassador Salim, now only 32, served as his nation's ambassador to Egypt 10 years ago; in the late 1960s he operated in the People's Republic of China and in North Korea. At the U.N., he chairs the committee on decolonization and is regarded as the most adroit of the African diplomats.

He represents Tanzania, a young socialist state formed by the amalgam of Tanganyika and the island of Zanzibar, on the lower east side of Africa. The population of Zanzibar is one-third Arab and Salim is at once an African, a Moslem, a far leftist, with experience in Communist and Arab capitals, and there are not many men fluent in Swahili and English who can present that combination.

According to high officials at the United Nations, it was Salim's active bridgework between the African, Arab and Communist nations that helped bring about the most stunning deal in the history of the General Assembly: The Arabs and Communists joined the Africans in suspending South Africa, and the Africans and the Communists joined the Arabs in recognizing the Palestine Liberation Organization.

The unseating of a charter member and the recognition of a nonstate is, by any account, a striking diplomatic maneuver. When Henry A. Kissinger — trusting Egyptian President Anwar Sadat — was passing the word not to worry about the Arab conference at Rabat, Ambassador Salim was getting and giving commitments based on a reading exactly to the contrary.

After Rabat, the Africans delivered their support of an invitation to the PLO to address the assembly; two

## Bible verse

REMEMBER THEREFORE how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast and repent. If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee.— Revelation 3:3.

days before Yasir Arafat arrived, the Arabs voted to support the ruling against South Africa's seating by the general assembly president, who happens to be Algeria's foreign minister. The Chinese Communists joined the orchestration; among other reasons, Salim had once helped them expel Taiwan.

As a result, the atmosphere at the United Nations today is similar to the euphoria of the Democratic convention of 1972. In Miami that year, quota systems thrust minorities forward, the winning delegates had a grand time, political establishments along with big labor were insulted and walked away, and disaster soon descended on the celebrants, who then learned the difference between a party and a Party.

At the U.N., the Third World delegates are acting as if they were a reflection of the real world's power. They are not; the General Assembly is the "forum," the place where small nations can use moral suasion and publicity to modify Security Council decisions. A podium is a fine thing, but it is not a source of genuine power.

Here stands the United States, resolutely backed up by Iceland and Bolivia (let's all buy fish in tins), wondering what to do with a runaway General Assembly. Some United States policymakers have been going over the alternatives:

- Pull out of the United Nations. The Soviets walked out once, and the United States was able to use a U.N. flag to counter the invasion of South Korea. They won't do that again and neither should we, if only to retain our veto power.

- Stop paying its bills. The United States has been a primary financial supporter of the United Nations, and many Americans think the whole shebang would fold up if we withhold our "assessments." as the Soviets sometimes have. Those days are gone; if we decline to ante up, the Arabs will happily pick up the tab.

- Move it to Zanzibar. This has its wistful appeal, and Nelson Rockefeller did not exactly brag to the judiciary committee that his family donated the Manhattan real estate to the United Nations, but New York would do well to remain the world capital.

- Humor it along. This is the alternative the United States will probably

choose. Instead of politicking to pick up votes, we will treat the voting as inconsequential; instead of working within the United Nations on matters of substance, we will deal directly with other powers, which is more or less the way we have operated in the past. Now we will stop pretending the U.N. is important when it is not.

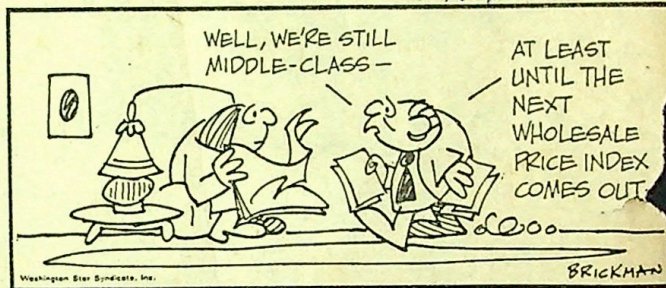
The tragedy is that the United Nations should be quite important in one area: Peacekeeping among small nations in an inflammable world. By its new disrespect for sovereignty, the General Assembly has offered itself as the petri dish of conflict. The body that was formed to help small nations keep the great powers from

making war is now making it difficult for great powers to keep small nations from starting wars.

Diplomats and politicians can salam Ambassador Salim's professional deftness in putting together the deals that led to this month's victories. But this has not been a victory of the United Nations — rather, a victory over the United Nations — and the organization that could still be averting World War III has made the breeding ground for the Third World's War.

Safire, a former aide to President Nixon, is a columnist for the *New York Times*.

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