


2015

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Recommended Citation

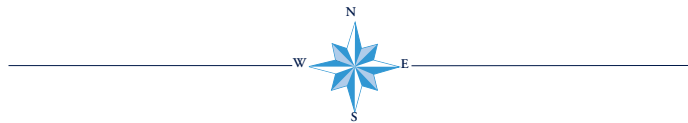
Potts, Robert (2015) "Book Review: Kofi Annan and the Role of Morality in International Relations," *The Cohen Journal*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/tcj/vol1/iss1/5>

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UNIVERSITY OF MAINE

THE COHEN INSTITUTE
for Leadership and Public Service



THE COHEN JOURNAL

Issue 1, Volume 1
Spring 2015

Book Review: Kofi Annan and the Role of Morality in International Relations

Robert Potts¹

It is difficult to think of a figure more closely tied up in the legacy of the modern United Nations than former Secretary-General Kofi Annan. In his 2012 memoir, *Interventions: A Life in War and Peace*, Annan recounts his time in the highest office of the United Nations (UN) and pontificates on how he believes the organization must evolve to meet the continuing needs of a modern world. His approach is to examine his time in the seat of the chief diplomat through the lens of certain key events and the UN's response to them. The unsparing critique brings in many of the highest figures in international relations over the past 20 years and is quick to cast blame anywhere Annan thinks it is due. Ultimately, the book serves two purposes: (1) to shore up Annan's legacy as secretary-general and, more importantly, (2) to paint a path forward for an organization that many denounce as anachronistic.

Kofi Annan is a child of decolonization. His father was an influential figure in the Gold Coast Colony, holding an executive position in an Anglo-African corporation but also deeply involved in the independence movement. Unlike political leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah, Annan's father, Henry Reginald Annan, was a gradualist and favored the slower progression toward independence pushed by the British themselves. It can be said that Annan grew up in a position of privilege compared to many in the contemporary Gold Coast society. He was also surrounded by politics, specifically intense dialogue and negotiation, from a young age. Annan's generation came of age with the independence of the new state of Ghana and was filled with idealism – a feeling quickly quashed by the realities of African post-colonial statehood. For Annan personally, the devolution of Ghanaian government into dictatorship led to the conclusion that: “working for the UN was the best way to serve [his] country and [his] continent” (Annan 2012, 27). He moved from working in the UN offices in Geneva at the lowest possible level, to serving in Addis Ababa, and eventually moving to New York where he rose to the position of assistant secretary general for peacekeeping operations before his elevation to the UN's highest position. He was the first sub-Saharan African to

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serve in this capacity and also the first to have come of age in the era of decolonization – a massive perspective shift for the organization as a whole.

Interventions covers a period of Annan's career beginning with the seminal events leading up to his elevation to the Secretary-Generalship and continues covering a couple significant conflicts in which he was involved following the expiration of his term. The book analyses international responses to crises in which Annan played some kind of role, such as the Rwandan Genocide and the AIDS epidemic. It does acknowledge areas in which Annan is a more controversial figure particularly, for example, the Oil-for-Food Program scandal of the early 2000s. It seems clear that the book has a subsidiary purpose of shoring up Annan's reputation in rebutting his alleged involvement. Ultimately, the work revolves around Annan's vision for necessary transformation to keep the U.N. a relevant organization into the new century. As Secretary-General he pioneered the adoption of the "Responsibility to Protect" doctrine government UN interventions, refocusing efforts from simply mediating conflicts to protecting basic human rights. His efforts focus on a fundamental conviction that the people of the world are the group that the UN ultimately ought to serve, not the self-interested member states.

Annan is at his strongest in recounting the inner-workings of international politics. He is as adept a diplomat in his writing as in his political work, providing compelling insight into the operations of an incredibly complex and often misunderstood organization. Looking back, it is easy to ascribe blame to the UN for failure to respond in devolving situations such as Rwanda or for not committing sufficient resources to truly follow through on its idealistic promises such as the Millennium Development Goals. Such tactics frequently appear in the media outlets of developed countries like the United States, but they remain fuelled by a general lack of knowledge about how the UN must operate within its sphere. Bill Gates, founder of Microsoft and noted philanthropist, particularly lauded this aspect of Annan's memoir, noting that: "For anybody who wants to understand the complexities of the role of the Secretary General, this book is an illuminating read" (Gates 2013). In this sense, the memoir could be interpreted as a continuation of the legacy of Annan's UN tenure — an attempt to humanize the largely bureaucratic and outmoded organization. For the people of the world to understand how the UN can help them, they must also understand the manner in which it functions and how they might seek to utilize its force for their betterment. A recurring statement that Annan makes quite convincingly is that the UN is not purposively for its member states, but it gains its legitimacy and ability to act from their consent. This simple reality is often a misunderstood fundamental concept restricting UN action. A failure to act is more likely the result of a lack of international consensus rather than a problem endemic to the organization, by Annan's argument.

This explanatory function connects quite closely to Annan's core criticisms of the organization he served and its member states. He shines in denouncing the unwillingness of individual governments to commit the necessary resources for the UN to pursue its mandates, a consummate Secretary General even eight years removed from his tenure. True to his focus on the people and not the government, Annan presents an idealized vision of

UN Peacekeeping. In doing so, he puts forward one of the most candid and powerful statements about the purpose of his organization and collective deficiency in its execution:

Entering any arena of conflict, with its blue helmets and white vehicles and a flag symbolizing far more powerfully than any words shelter from the storm, the UN was making a solemn pledge: we have come to keep the peace. This was our commitment, and perhaps our greatest failure was never fully to grasp the enormity of this obligation (Annan 2012).

Annan's tenure in the high offices of the UN included some of the worst atrocities of the 20th century such as Srebrenica and Rwanda. Interventions does not shy away from this fact and a certain degree of retrospection shows that these failures weigh heavily on Annan's mind. It explains the politics behind many decisions that had tragic human repercussions, but denounces these politics in remarkably strong words for a diplomat. In a tone as close to disapproval as one will find in this memoir, Annan emphatically states that, "to a man, woman, or child for whom the presence of a blue helmet is all that lies between safety and certain death, talk of limited mandates, inadequate means, under-resourced missions — however accurate — is, at best, beside the point, at worst, a betrayal" (Annan 2012, 10-11). Throughout the work this theme is echoed; the argument that fundamental responsibility for failure to act rests on member states' intransigence is strong and consistent. This denunciation is indeed one of Annan's better points and well developed throughout the work.

However there is an inherent weakness, in the fact that Annan leaves the blame entirely on the member states without apportioning some to the UN itself and its leadership. Indeed, throughout the work Annan is careful to avoid accepting any personal responsibility, either individually or ex officio for the Secretariat. He recognizes and speaks convincingly of his of the problems regarding member state involvement and a need to change this for moral reasons, but is in many cases quiet about the role of UN bureaucracy in the same areas. Nowhere does this become apparent than in the chapter on Rwanda -- a horrific event that unfolded while Annan was Assistant Secretary General for Peacekeeping Operations.

When questioned about the series of events leading up to Rwandan Genocide, Annan's response has not changed in twenty years; he firmly holds that: "the problem had been in the international community's collective refusal to act, through the UN in particular" (Annan 2012, 74). It is undeniable that the member states' failure to adequately outfit the UN Assistance Mission for Rwandan Genocide (UNAMIR) and later disinclination to involve themselves in the unfolding conflict created serious problem, but Annan also admits to a key instance of personal fault: prior to the onset of the genocide, Annan's Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) office received a telegram from Lt. Gen. Romeo Dallaire, the Canadian officer in charge of UNAMIR, stating that there were plans for genocide and that UNAMIR had planned a raid on an arms cache, which was to be used in the executions. His response was to refuse Dallaire this request, stating that, "the overriding consideration being 'the need to avoid entering into a course of action that might lead to the use of force

and unanticipated repercussions” (Annan 2012, 53). The next several pages are spent trying to justify this telegram, arguing that UNAMIR was inadequately equipped and that with Somalia fresh on all minds involved, they were not prepared to risk the lives of peacekeepers. Ultimately, Annan attempts to bring the blame back around by saying that, “the reason for this was clear to all: there was no appetite whatsoever in the Security Council to even consider the use of force in a peacekeeping mission...” (Annan 2012, 55). This argument remains not wholly convincing and Dallaire has since made a point to publicly protest that the genocide was functionally preventable but for DPKO refusal to sanction his planned arms raid. This is also the point on which many of Annan’s sharpest critics emerge. Rory Stewart, a British Member of Parliament, shows Annan’s sequence of events in a different light; he points out that, “[Annan] accepts responsibility for not contacting the Security Council. But having made the case against himself, Annan does not apologize. Nor does he blame a lack of international will to intervene” (Stewart 2012). Stewart does well to remind that the Security Council did not refuse to help, Annan chose to refuse Dallaire’s request and not even inform the council.

One of the more interesting critiques of Annan’s work is a short review by Michael Ignatieff. In it, he sharply criticizes Annan for relying too much on moral prestige and the fundamental ideals of the UN rather than credible force. He points to one of Annan’s admissions in the aftermath of the Rwandan Genocide episode as among the most damning, namely the statement that, “[UNAMIR] was a peacekeeping force, sent in a deliberately weak and vulnerable form to engender the trust of both sides, which emerged as even weaker in reality due to the challenges of finding troops and equipment” (Annan 2012, 75-76). This is an illuminating response with regard to Annan’s typical pattern of assigning blame. It grants a certain degree of fault to the member states that failed to adequately supply UNAMIR, but it also indicates that the force was intentionally weak beyond that limitation.

It is quite clear throughout Annan’s work that he is a firm believer in the moral power of the UN. This exact situation makes it exceptionally clear, though, how flawed that view is when functioning in a real world situation. As Ignatieff astutely notes: “When moral prestige deludes itself into thinking it need not arm itself, it can make itself an accomplice to evil” (Ignatieff 2012). Annan admits freely all throughout *Interventions* that he is a firm believer in the moral prestige of the UN; his series of actions leading up to the genocide in Rwanda seem to validate Ignatieff’s assertion and lay some degree of blame at Annan’s feet, a charge he steadfastly continues to refuse. Throughout his career, though, Annan regularly exhibited what can only be described as, “dismaying faith in the deterrent force of good intentions” (Ignatieff 2012). While he often attributes the cause to intransigence on the part of the international community, Annan has with very few exceptions never been one to speak softly but carry a big stick, as U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt famously quipped.

As Annan recounts the various successes and tragedies of his twenty or so years in high UN leadership, he consistently argues for the same points. He seeks to remind UN members the true affiliation of the UN is to its constituent people, not their governments. More importantly, he pushes for an evolution of the U.N. as a body, expressly stating that, “the

aim is to alter the balance of power between state and citizen” (Annan 2012). While Annan is part of a small group in the high echelons of international power pushing for such a shift, he is quite convincing in his part. Ignatieff explains this particular trend well, suggesting that Annan: “can be seen as an entrepreneur of moral standards, promoting new ideas of collective behavior, sovereign responsibility, and international criminal accountability for a world that briefly believed that globalization might bring us together” (Ignatieff 2012). Throughout his tenure in the UN, Annan was careful to cultivate a deep sense of morality and push the organization to accept new ideas. In line with this thinking, he spearheaded the push for the Millennium Development Goals and transitioned peacekeeping to accept the new Responsibility to Protect. He succinctly links many of the policy positions undertaken throughout his tenure as Secretary-General to support this fundamental idea of progress.

The urgently needed paradigm shift that forms the core argument underlying Annan’s memoir is one with which the average person would be hard-pressed to disagree. His suggested new UN regime is focused on the protection and assurance of basic human rights. The stumbling blocks emerge when member states are forced to make sacrifices for this to happen, when a longstanding traditional world order is upended in support of the rights of the least of humanity. Nowhere is this quite so firmly seen as in the landmark adoption of the Responsibility to Protect doctrine by U.N. member states. Annan describes this new idea in simple terms with an easily comprehensible benchmark; he declares that: “Ultimately, the success of our efforts on the question of intervention should not be measured in wars launched or sanctions imposed but in lives saved” (Annan 2012, 114). Sanctions and military incursions were a longstanding reality of international affairs and Annan does not suggest they are going to disappear, but recognizes that by looking at them one analyzes the wrong metric. This statement in and of itself is on balance uncontroversial.

The Responsibility to Protect does not stop there, however. In Annan’s own words, it is an attempt to reimagine the very definition of sovereignty that has accompanied nation-states from their inception. He holds that the legitimacy of the UN in the eyes of the peoples of the world rested on, “the question of whether we were dedicated, not to the power of states but to saving lives and defending the human rights of individuals” (Annan 2012, 115). In pushing the Responsibility to Protect, Annan believed that the answer to this question lay in changing the expectations of states. His ultimate goal was to create a world in which, “States bent on criminal behavior knew frontiers were not the absolute defense,” that they were held to be in the past (Annan 2012, 115). Annan’s vision of a new U.N. that was not state-centric, but people-centric means a fundamental reimagining of the principle of state sovereignty more dramatic than any other in world history. Throughout the work, though, he is cogent and convincing as to why this is a necessity for the modern world.

Annan is a remarkable figure that dominated the top echelons of international politics for almost two decades. He was a visionary and a moralist, one who saw his organization as flawed and sought to reform it. Even twenty years after the fact, he refuses to outright accept blame for his role in the international response to events such as the Rwandan Genocide. He can also claim remarkable successes in diplomatic resolution, which he is

quick to share with anyone deserving a piece of credit. On the whole, his memoir is less about this legacy than about a vision for the future. He knows what his past record is and he must live with the consequences, but he genuinely seeks to create a world in which the global community will respond to crises better than it did in his time. In this aim, *Interventions* is a resounding success; Annan's weaknesses emerge in reckoning with the past, but his strengths are looking forward to a brighter tomorrow.

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