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Mr. Lonely

James Traub examines Kofi Annan's career as United Nations secretary general.

THE BEST INTENTIONS
Kofi Annan and the UN in the Era of American World Power.
By James Traub.
419 pp. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. $25.

By JOSEF JOFFE

IS the United Nations boring and irrelevant? This book certainly is not. Call the organization a "haven of hypocrites" or "humanity's best hope," tote up its many miseries and few glories. But if you want to understand this vexing creature with its 192 heads, "The Best Intentions" is one of the finest guides around, indeed, the best in recent memory.

This superlative is based on a stroke of author's luck. James Traub, a contributing writer for The New York Times Magazine, landed a kind of serial scoop in 2004 when he persuaded Kofi Annan, the secretary general of the United Nations, who retires on Dec. 31, to make a journalist's dream come true: giving him unparalleled access to the man, his minions and his institution. Traub became both fly-on-the-wall and top conversationalist, talking to the S.G., as he is known in the United Nations hierarchy, a total of 18 times.

Yet Traub's elegantly constructed story is hardly a court chronicle. Though drawn to Annan's gracious and engaging personality, Traub never loses his analytical distance. Nor does he confuse the sugary cant of international politics, so richly present on the East River, with the sour realities of power and interest. Starting out on a note of hope, he is quick to pierce whatever illusions he might have had. The cold war, he recalls, "had divided the world into implacable camps and thus paralyzed the U.N."; the end of the conflict "had seemed to be the most precious of gifts for the world body."

"Had seemed" are the operative words. For with the Soviet Union's demise in 1991, the realities were as intractable as ever. Yes, the first Iraq war earlier that year did feel like a "watershed": the Security Council acted with dispatch and decision to expel Saddam Hussein from Kuwait and so demonstrated how powerful the United Nations could be "once the paralysis of the cold war had lifted." But the stalemate "had also concealed the fundamental defects in the U.N.'s machinery." And so, "the euphoria of 1991 would prove as transitory as the euphoria of 1945."

How shall we count the ways? There was Somalia, when the international community tucked tail along with the United States after 18 American soldiers were slain. There was the "war of the Yugoslav succession" in the 1990s, when the United Nations refused serious strikes against the Serbs — even after the massacre at Srebrenica in 1995, which left 7,400 dead in the "greatest atrocity in Europe since World War II." When the world did act against Serbia in 1999, it did so not through the United Nations, but the United States and NATO, and then without the blessing of the Security Council.

Genocide in Rwanda and the cry of "never again!" found an encore in Darfur, a murderous "cleansing campaign" that rages to this day. And why? Because the United Nations never adhered to, and never could adhere to, what Dag Hammarskjold, the second secretary general, after Trygve Lie, once piously (or imperiously) proclaimed to be its guiding philosophy: "The aims" that the principles of the Charter "are to safeguard are holier than the policies of any single nation."

Or, as Bob Orr, one of Annan's senior advisers, explains to Traub: "There's a confusion between the U.N. as a stage and the U.N. as an actor. As an actor, there's so little we can do, and often the people accusing us are the same ones who prevent us from being able to act." Morton Abramowitz, the head of the International Crisis Group, an independent conflict-prevention organization, and the journalist Samantha Power put it more tersely: "Major and minor powers alike are committed only to stop killing that harms their national interests."

This is the hard-core problem of all collective action. Nations act not to do good for others, but to do well for themselves — and no wonder. It is their blood and treasure that must be spent. And when it comes to "peacekeeping" or "peace-enforcement," the United Nations has yet another problem. All humanitarian tragedies — Rwanda, Bosnia, Kosovo, Darfur — are also power struggles between tribes, governments and insurgents. So what are the Blue Helmets supposed to do?

If they fight against X, they willy-nilly support Y. But if they don't fight, they also take sides — as they did in Bosnia when, by just sitting around, they favored the stronger Serbs. Traub quotes the former United Nations under secretary Brian Urquhart to make the point: "The moment a peacekeeping force starts killing people it becomes part of the conflict it is supposed to be controlling, and therefore a part of the problem." To test this theorem, watch the new United Na-

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tions force in Lebanon. Will it really act against Hezbollah — and thus on the side of Israel?

This was all supposed to change with Kofi Annan, the "least self-aggrandizing of men," who took the helm of the United Nations in 1997. Two years earlier, as secretary, he had won the Clinton administration's favor by going around his boss, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, and briefly suspending the United Nations' veto over airstrikes against the Serbs. Expressing "deep remorse" over the "failure" in Rwanda, Annan laid out the new dispensation: "If the collective conscience of humanity ... cannot find in the United Nations its greatest tribune, there is a grave danger it will look elsewhere for peace and for justice."

Annan had the "best intentions" — not quite enough for a true hero, who prevails in the end. A well-meaning and indeed noble figure, Annan was blessed with eloquence and charisma. But he was not up to the self-interested schemers of this world.

The little ones were ensconced in the "G-77," the bloc of third-world nations. Their battle cry was not "peace and justice," but "sovereignty." The United Nations as enforcer of goodness? Not according to the president of Algeria, who growled, "Interference in internal affairs may take place only with the consent of the state in question." But Annan's biggest foe was George W. Bush, who was determined to have his war against Saddam Hussein, with or without the Security Council's say-so. The medium players were the French, Germans and Russians who, in 2002 and 2003, ruthlessly turned the Security Council into a battlefield against Bush. For all of them, interest mattered more than the institution.

It was power politics as usual, and Annan was reduced to pleading: "Choosing to follow or to reject the multilateral path must not be a matter of political convenience." Tell that to the one and only superpower. Or to Russia and China. "I had never felt so sorry for the man," Traub writes at one point. And he titles one of his chapters "Nice Guys Get Crushed." It was downhill from the time of the American invasion, especially when the "oil for food" scandal broke, implicating Annan's son, Kojo, as a man on the take.

Traub, always the dispassionate analyst, neither condemns nor condones. His is a melancholy tale, beautifully written and meticulously researched — about a hero who was not so much flawed as indecisive, whose clout could never measure up to his lofty purpose. How could it? A secretary general is precisely what the title says: a secretary beholden to 192 bosses, all seeking power while pretending to serve the common good.

"The secretary general's position is very lonely," Annan confided to Traub in their last conversation. And Traub observes: "The major powers never want a big secretary general, but now they may want an even smaller one." With Ban Ki-moon, the South Korean, it will be back to normal. How many of the six secretaries general before Annan can anyone name? □

Josef Joffe is currently teaching at Stanford, where he is also a fellow of the Hoover Institution and Institute for International Studies. He is the author of "Überpower: America's Imperial Temptation."

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