

## Review of “Interventions: A Life in War and Peace”, by Kofi A. Annan

Njunga Michael Mulikita  
*Dag Hammarskjöld Institute, Copperbelt University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.law.cornell.edu/sajpd>

 Part of the [African Studies Commons](#), [International Humanitarian Law Commons](#), and the [International Law Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Mulikita, Njunga Michael (2015) "Review of “Interventions: A Life in War and Peace”, by Kofi A. Annan," *Southern African Journal of Policy and Development*: Vol. 2 : No. 1 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://scholarship.law.cornell.edu/sajpd/vol2/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Scholarship@Cornell Law: A Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Southern African Journal of Policy and Development by an authorized editor of Scholarship@Cornell Law: A Digital Repository. For more information, please contact [jmp8@cornell.edu](mailto:jmp8@cornell.edu).

## **Book Review**

**Review of “Interventions: A Life in War and Peace”, by Kofi A. Annan, Penguin Books, 2012, 383 pp.**

This book offers a highly informative account of the life story of the seventh UN Secretary-General, Kofi Atta Annan, the first Sub-Saharan African UN Chief to emerge from within the vast bureaucracy of the United Nations. It is a riveting account narrated by the consummate UN diplomat who served in all the Organisation’s major duty stations ranging from Geneva, Switzerland, through Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, to a peacekeeping mission in the hot and dusty Sinai Peninsula, Egypt, and ultimately the 38<sup>th</sup> Floor of the UN Headquarters, New York.

The book has eight chapters. Annan begins by tracing his youth in a period of immense political tumult in his native Gold Coast (Ghana). At that time Ghana’s charismatic leader Kwame Nkrumah was in the vanguard of agitating for self-rule in Ghana and other colonies in sub-Saharan Africa. Annan grew up in a happy and stable middle class family headed by his father, Henry Reginald Annan, ‘an Executive of a European trading company, a Freemason, and a devout Anglican in a culture of tribes and ancestral worship.’ (Annan, 2012: 15).

The future Secretary-General of the United Nations was to commence his undergraduate studies at the University of Science & Technology in Kumasi, Northern Ghana, where he manifested leadership potential by being elected Vice President of the National Union of Ghanaian Students. He was then granted a scholarship by the Ford Foundation to study economics in an icy cold environment, St Paul College, Macalester, Minnesota, United States. Upon completion of his studies in the US, the young and idealistic Kofi Annan joined the World Health Organization (WHO) at the level of P1, Step 1 (the lowest professional rank in the United Nations).

This book is a UN insider’s account that demonstrates the daunting challenges the world body had to surmount in a world that was transiting from the Cold War in the 1990s, into a post-Cold War world of crises and general disorder. Annan shows how there was an exponential increase in peacekeeping operations after the end of the Cold War and how the UN was ill prepared to assume the responsibility of managing the proliferation of peacekeeping missions. Annan deserves credit here, because he graciously acknowledges the ground-breaking work of his predecessor, Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld in “inventing” the concept of peacekeeping.

The unenviable task of guiding the UN in this scenario of uncertainty and instability lay on the shoulders of Annan’s predecessor, the Egyptian Boutros Boutros-Ghali, who in 1992 on the instruction of the first ever United Nations Security Council Summit of Heads of

State & Government authored an “Agenda for Peace” which ‘focused on the civil wars gripping different parts of the world’. (Annan, 2012: 32-3).

Annan tells the story how it should be told, with candour, lucidity and openness. As Assistant Secretary-General and later Under Secretary-General in charge of the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO), which was hived out of the Office of Special Political Affairs in 1992, Annan provides the reader with a rare insight into the politics of UN peacekeeping missions. The book enumerates in detail the frustrations Annan as a senior bureaucrat at UN Headquarters and his closest aides experienced, when classic peacekeeping as defined by his predecessor Hammarskjöld, failed to halt blood baths in Bosnia, Rwanda and Somalia. Simply put, UN Member States instructed the Secretary-General to keep the peace, when there was no peace to keep.

Chapter Five, entitled, “The Fate of the Continent; Africa’s Wars, Africa’s Peace”, makes very refreshing reading for anyone interested in Africa’s political governance. The former UN Chief recalls his attendance of the 1997 Summit of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) in Harare, Zimbabwe. Thus he observed: ‘assembled in the audience were the heads of state and government from all over Africa, many of whom were in that position only by the grace of arms: coup plotters enthroned simply because of the illegitimate power represented in their military uniforms.’ (Annan, 2012: 35). In his address to the Summit, Secretary-General Annan said: ‘Armies exist to protect national sovereignty, not to train their guns on their own people.’ (Annan, 2012: 174-5). He further added: ‘Africa can no longer tolerate, and accept as faits accomplis, coups against elected governments and the illegal seizure of power by military cliques, who sometimes act for sectional interests, sometimes simply for their own.’ (Annan, 2012: 118-9).

This statement marked a “paradigm shift” in the sense that here was a Secretary-General of the United Nations, the first from sub-Saharan Africa, departing from customary diplomatic platitudes and etiquette, to bluntly urge African leaders to improve political governance in their countries. This candid statement was consistent with Annan’s position that sovereignty is not absolute and that the international community has the obligation to intervene in territories where gross violations of human rights are perpetrated by illegitimate regimes under the veil of national sovereignty – “The Responsibility to Protect(R2P)”.

In my view, the book has one omission. Annan does not delve into the politics of his election as UN Secretary-General in 1996, after the United States vetoed Boutros-Ghali’s bid for re-election. He prudently avoids commenting on the state of his personal relationship with his predecessor. He does however mildly criticise Boutros-Ghali’s management style, when he discusses the bureaucratic nightmare of trying to harmonise the vague and imprecisely worded resolutions of the UN Security Council with the operations of the Department for Peacekeeping Operations and the whims of troop contributing countries. Thus Annan writes: ‘Compounding this problem was the style of management embraced by

Boutros-Ghali as Secretary-General. He took great pains, in particular to restrict the flow of information to and from the Security Council.' (Annan, 2012: 38).

In the final analysis, Annan succeeded Boutros-Ghali in a field comprising three other Sub-Saharan African candidates: Amara Essy (Cote d'Ivoire), Hamid Al-Gabid (Niger) and Ahmedou Ould Abdallah (Mauritania).

All things considered Annan's brilliant narration of his time in the service of the United Nations reinforces the view that the UN commands universal legitimacy. Notwithstanding its frailties and flaws, the United Nations remains an indispensable and irreplaceable instrument for global peace, development and stability. Hence, "Interventions: A Life in War and Peace" is a "must read" for all those who appreciate and value the work of the UN all over the world.

### **References**

Annan, Kofi A. (2012). *Interventions: A Life in War and Peace*. Penguin Books.

**Njunga Michael Mulikita**

*(Dag Hammarskjöld Institute, Copperbelt University)*