Shake Hands with the Devil: The Failure of Humanity in Rwanda

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Interventions by the United Nations for the purpose of establishing and maintaining peace have a mixed record. Some have been reasonably successful, such as in East Timor, while others, such as Rwanda, have not. Roméo Dallaire, the author, a retired lieutenant general in the Canadian army, suggests that efforts by the United Nations Security Council largely depend upon the location of the problem area. East Timor, just to the north of Australia and on the flank of major shipping routes, met the requirements. Rwanda, in his opinion, did not.

Under the Charter of the United Nations, interventions may be governed by Chapter 6, which stipulates that the peacekeeping contingent is not to use force but to separate the warring sides, all the while maintaining a neutral stance. However, under Chapter 7, UN troops are authorized to use force to keep the antagonists apart. Dallaire speaks of a Chapter 6½, a hybrid of the two without official UN sanction. When the decision was made to send a Chapter 6 mission to Rwanda, the Canadians, whose army had had considerable experience in the peacekeeping field, offered to provide a commander, some of the staff, and logistic support. Dallaire, who had recently been promoted to the rank of general and whose tour in Canada had come to an end, leaped at the opportunity to go to Rwanda when the command was offered. Upon reporting to UN headquarters in New York, Dallaire was told that his resources were limited and that the mission had to be small. He was ordered to design the mission to fit those parameters and not the demands of the actual situation. A devout Catholic, he was particularly interested in protecting human life. Such commitment, not uncommon among military personnel, can turn conventional wisdom on its head.

Belgium had acquired Rwanda from Germany in the 1920 League of Nations Mandate and in 1925 united it administratively with the Belgian Congo, which lay to the west. Like most European powers with colonial dependencies, Belgium staffed much of its governing apparatus with native civil servants—the Tutsi—who for the most part were better educated than other Rwandans.
and in many ways resembled Europeans. The Tutsis also captured the top jobs in commercial enterprises. The other principal tribe, the Hutus, were not happy with this development. When Rwanda achieved its independence from Belgium in 1962 and promptly installed a Hutu-dominated government, they were in a position to exact revenge on the formerly elite Tutsi population.

Many Tutsis fled to neighboring Uganda, Burundi, and Zaire. The Tutsis slowly gathered strength in those havens and developed (by African standards) a first-class army. By the early 1990s the Tutsi army was prepared to invade Rwanda and install a Tutsi government. Threatened by the imminent return of their enemies, the Hutus quietly encouraged the formation of vigilante groups to drive out or murder remaining Tutsis, as well as moderate Hutus. Matters had reached this stage when Dallaire arrived in the Rwandan capital, Kigali, in August 1993.

In addition to being the military representative of the UN, Dallaire was also temporarily assigned the position of political representative. When no one was immediately assigned to replace him in the latter post, the Canadians should have sensed the general lack of interest on the part of UN authorities. Naive in the ways of the UN bureaucracy, however, Dallaire was optimistic that he could perform his mission to the fullest extent. Eventually, in late October 1993, the United Nations sent a political representative with the somewhat improbable name Jacques-Roger Booh-Booh, former Cameroonian foreign minister and a friend of the UN secretary-general, Boutros Boutros-Ghali. Interested primarily in the “perks” of the office, Booh-Booh was to prove useless. Further, the forces provided for the mission (known as UNAMIR, for United Nations Assistance Mission to Rwanda) were grossly inadequate. Its troops, Ghanaian and Tunisian, were brave, well trained, and professionally led, but they arrived without equipment. Pleas by Dallaire to UN headquarters for equipment and logistic support from the major powers fell on deaf ears. The United States, Britain, and France had no interest in the mission, although France did send aircraft to evacuate Europeans caught in Rwanda by the hostilities; requests by Africans for rescue were denied.

Not long after Dallaire arrived, an informant in the Rwandan government told him of weapon caches hidden by the extremist militias. The general immediately requested permission to find and destroy them but was refused on the grounds that such action would violate the neutrality of the mission under Chapter 6; nor was Dallaire permitted to engage in intelligence operations. Instead, he was directed to identify the informer to the Rwandan government. Dallaire honored the order not to destroy the arms, but he refused to betray the informant. In any event, the source’s information soon dried up when the futility of the situation became unmistakable.

The corruption of the extremist government authorities, the elimination of the moderates, and the subsequent mass murder, amounting to genocide, is too involved to discuss adequately in this review. Suffice it to say that approximately eight hundred thousand Africans—men, women, and children, nearly all of them innocent civilians—were killed, some after severe torture.
Dallaire is especially hard on France, Britain, and the United States for their refusal to provide assistance or authorize the UN to take timely measures to block the massacre. He attributes their inaction in part to France’s other interests in the region (the president’s son is said to have had business interests in Rwanda) and to fear in the Clinton administration of another Somalia debacle. (Although Dallaire does not mention it, the Clinton administration’s lack of response was to have severe consequences for the United States when Osama Bin Laden interpreted its unwillingness to act as American weakness.) Dallaire is not easy on Canada either. He refuses in his book to place blame on anyone within the UN leadership; however, in a later interview with a San Francisco radio talk-show host, Dallaire thoroughly castigated Boutros-Ghali as having been more responsible than anyone else for the genocide.

Command of UNAMIR had profound effects on the Canadian general, among them post-traumatic stress disorder. When he was relieved and returned to Canada, he was offered, and he accepted, the number-two post in the Canadian army. Haunted by his experience in Rwanda, he retired before his term ended.

This is an excellent example of a good and highly competent man deeply disturbed by international failures and the Machiavellian tactics of world powers. His experience with the United Nations raises the question of how far a military commander should go in honoring orders from civilian authority. The precedent of the Nuremberg trials provides military officers with sanction to refuse orders that would produce sins of commission. But what about the “sins of omission”? There are no precedents, which arguably prevented Dallaire from taking measures to block the genocide.

In the book’s preface, Dallaire recounts how a retired army chaplain asked him if he still believed in God after his African experience. His reply was “yes, because he had shaken hands with the Devil.” The work has had wide success in Canada but not as yet in the United States. (The American reader should note that morning or evening “prayers” refers to staff consultations, not religious observances.) *Shake Hands with the Devil* is an important book and should be read by every military officer and senior noncommissioned officer.

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Jeffrey Record is one of the nation’s most experienced and respected defense analysts. His latest critique of the 2003 Iraq war, *Dark Victory*, provides many important insights into the reasons for the war and for its successes and failures. More generally, this work is a case study of the challenges of transforming military victory into a victory with meaningful and lasting strategic impact. In many ways this book focuses on the critical difference between “war fighter” and “war winner,” and on the fact that conflict termination and its aftermath are at least as critical as any phase of battle proper.

Record, however, writes as a critic of a war he does not believe in, and of a nation-building process he sees as a