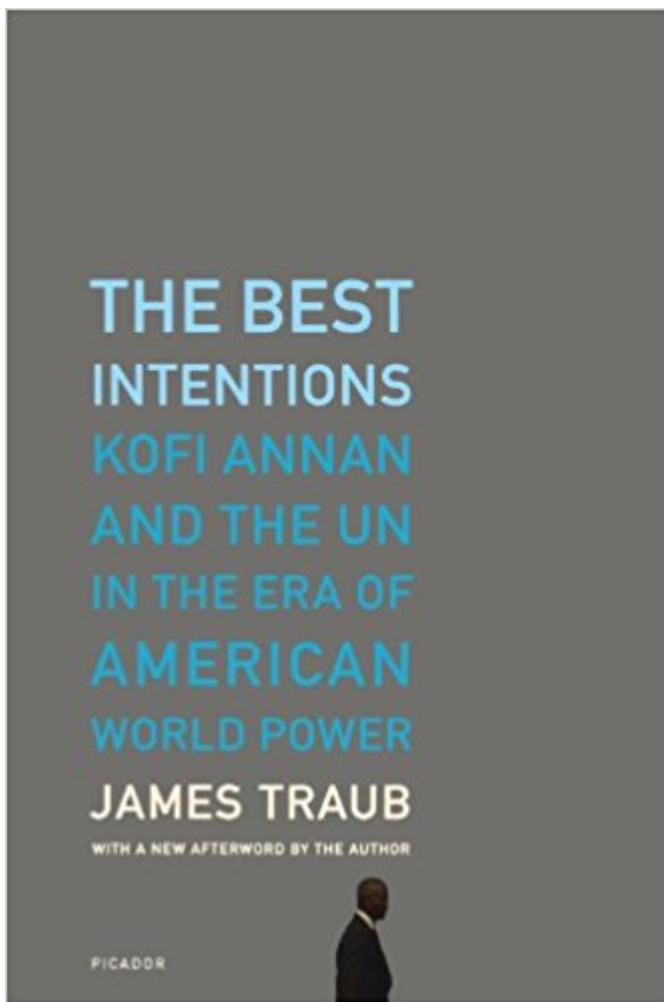


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# The Best Intentions: Kofi Annan And The UN In The Era Of American World Power



## Synopsis

Updated for the Paperback Edition During his first term as secretary-general of the United Nations, Kofi Annan was one of the most widely admired men in the world. In 2001, he won the Nobel Peace Prize. Then the UN failed to stop war in Iraq and genocide in Darfur, and the institution was engulfed by the Oil-for-Food scandal. By the time Annan left office in December 2006, both he and the UN had suffered a terrible loss of standing. Did the UN's failures arise from its own structure and culture or from a clash with an American administration determined to go its own way in defiance of world opinion? In *The Best Intentions*, New York Times Magazine writer James Traub traces the entwined histories of Kofi Annan and the UN from 1992 to the present, and offers a definitive portrait of the institution's role in the age of American dominance.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

âœEngaging, nuanced, and often fascinating. The Best Intentions is proof that the phrase 'U.N. page-turner' is not hopelessly oxymoronic.â • âœThe Wall Street Journalâ œif 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. . . . Beautifully written and meticulously researched.â • âœThe New York Times Book Reviewâ œOne of the most definitive and accessible studies of the U.N. and its chief executive ever published.â • âœForeign Affairsâ œFascinating . . . The book works, not just as a portrait of Annan but as one of the UN itself, in part because Annan personally

encapsulates many characteristics of that inspiring but maddening organization. •  
•Salon.com •A highly readable account of the infighting and drama that have gone on behind the scenes over the past fifteen years, along with often amusingly acerbic thumbnail sketches of several prominent characters. • •The Economist

James Traub has been a contributing writer for The New York Times Magazine--where he writes about international affairs, U.S. foreign policy, and national political issues--since 1998. He has written three books, including *City on a Hill* and *The Devil's Playground*. He lives in New York City.

Fascinating, insightful and highly informative, one of the best books I've read about the UN, it throws a welcome light on the inner workings of an institution that is too often derided by people who don't understand it. James Traub, by contrast, really understands it, he's seen it up close for years and knows how to explain it - and of course, his personal knowledge of Kofi Annan and his team is invaluable. He is a master at untangling the threads that are inevitably numerous in a complex institutional structure such as the UN and making it all clear to his reader, apportioning the blame in an equitable manner. Kofi Annan comes out like the very human and highly idealistic person that he really is, virtues and shortcomings shown alike with compassion and understanding. In fact, the title is extremely apt: "The Best Intentions", they are the ones that guide UN staff in their work, and sure enough, in spite of all their efforts, the end result is often not the way intended, political pressures from member countries, especially from the US, derail them. The life of a UN Secretary General is strewn with frustrations... This is a book that will clarify for you many episodes that fell into deep, public controversy, in particular the Food for Oil Programme for Syria. For anyone interested in understanding what really happened, it's a must read.

The strengths of this excellent book far outweigh its weaknesses. It is especially compelling as a case study of leadership in a deeply flawed but essential institution. Traub's had access to Kofi Annan, as well as Annan's chief lieutenants at the UN, over an extended period of time that included his early successes, the events prior to the Iraq war and the Iraq "Oil for Food" scandal. Through the text we gain an understanding of the inner workings of the infamously cumbersome UN bureaucracy as well as the impossible constraints placed upon it by the United States government and the 191 other member states. Annan's early successes as Secretary General were substantial; yet his passive style of leadership made him very vulnerable. He ultimately paid a severe price. Traub documents Annan's physical and mental breakdowns and the blow to his reputation caused by his

failure to properly monitor the Oil for Food program. The book would have benefited from a section with further details on the overwhelming complexity of the UN organization and the lack of power of the Secretary General to control it. Traub also occasionally feels compelled to engage in weak, superficial "fair and balanced" analysis that is not helpful to the overall narrative. Overall, however, this is a fine book that is a useful way to learn about the challenges of running the UN.

The author has had a unique opportunity to personally follow what Kofi Annan did as a leader of the UN as its leader and acting interacting directly with heads of states of many countries. After reading the book you can become more optimistic or more pessimistic about the future of the UN. The successes like the liberation of Kuwait and dealing with the Tsunami effects in Indonesia are very important successes. Successes are only possible if all of the members of the Security Council agree and see to it that the actions and resources necessary to solve a problem are made available. That, unfortunately, is rare. The book does not give much indications as to how the many shortcomings of the UN can be solved. If you are an optimist you hope that with a competent leader, like Annan, and changes in attitudes of country governments much progress can be made. If you are a pessimist, you expect that the UN will just muddle along. I am an optimist and think that the book is an excellent starting point to generate practical ideas on how to improve the performance of the UN.

This book follows the career of Kofi Annan from his days as a foreign student in America to his term as UN secretary general. The author, thru interviews of Annan and those he dealt with, uses Annan's career to trace the history of the UN from its inception at the end of WWII to its impotence at the onrush of American power after the 9/11 attacks. The book's story is told chronologically, and lays out the complex, and often hidden relationships between the UN's career bureaucrats, and member states like the US, Russia, China, etc... Included in this story are many of the key issues the UN has tackled over the past 5 decades; such as the Israeli - Palestinian conflict, Saddam Hussein and the 2 Iraq wars, possible expansion of the permanent Security Council, and the North vs South dichotomy. All of these struggles are told thru the career of Kofi Annan; how he dealt with them, how he was affected by them, and sometimes, how he was defeated by them. But the climax of the book is best showed by the front cover; a polite, unassuming black man who has seen too much of the world getting browbeaten by a loud white man who wants to take over the world. The principal drawback of the book is the over-emphasis of the role of nations, and the minimal mention of the role of NGO's and corporations. Groups like the Red Cross, Doctors Without Borders, Oxfam, and

various religious missionary groups all get short-thrifted by this book. And corporations are almost non-existent. This is a big hole in the book's treatment as many countries' domestic and foreign policies are driven by corporations. So overall, an OK book.

With insight, wit and stores of knowledge about the UN and world affairs, James Traub paints a sympathetic but brutally honest portrait of Kofi Annan as Secy-General. Five star.

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