

PROLOGUE

In the spring of 1989, I was in the city of Gdansk, having lunch with Lech Walesa in the house of his close aide at the time, the Rev. Henryk Jankowski. The trade union leader was a mythic figure for all those who had followed the fight of the Polish people for freedom since the dark days of 1981. Poland once again was a symbol of courage and energy, and its fight for freedom attracted throughout Europe the same kind of sympathy that Polish nationalists had attracted in the nineteenth century. Once again, here was a nation that against all odds was determined to stand its ground and wouldn't be easily brought to submission. As the head of the French Foreign Ministry's policy planning staff, I wanted to understand where that would lead. Would there be another showdown, a new state of siege, and violence? I had all sorts of scenarios in my mind, but none included the end of the cold war. My Polish interlocutors were explaining how the fight of the trade unions had turned into a political fight that was putting the communist leadership of Poland off balance. They wanted to convince a skeptical young French diplomat that indeed what was happening was serious, and to achieve that, they showed me a video that had been shot of a meeting between Margaret Thatcher and Walesa: What better way for a union leader to be taken seriously than to show that even an arch-enemy of unions had taken him seriously. It was interesting to see how the "Iron Lady" was peppering Walesa with questions because, with her keen political nose, she may have sensed that this union leader was indeed going to change the world.

The decade that started with the momentous elections in Poland, followed by the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the unification of Germany, and the demise of the Soviet Union, had an optimistic beginning for those who had lived in the richest parts of the world. For many years, some of us had felt slightly uncomfortable that our wealth and security apparently were not transferable. In Europe, there was a sense that the immense waste of the cold war was ending and that the hopes that had existed in 1945, and then were dashed by the divisions of the cold war, could now be realized. Nation states would come together in a “new world order,” and the states would serve their people instead of sometimes being their jailers. Even more radically, borders would stop being walls behind which governments could commit the worst abuses.

The fall of the Berlin Wall was just the beginning. In 1991, for the first time in the history of the United Nations, the Security Council intervened directly against an oppressive government, adopting Resolution 688 insisting that “Iraq allow immediate access by international humanitarian organizations to all those in need of assistance.” At the time, this was read by Western nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) as demonstrating a growing sense of solidarity that was chipping at traditional notions of sovereignty: Borders could not be a barrier when people were dying. The fact that the resolution reiterated “the commitment of all Member States to the sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of Iraq” and noted that the violence against the Kurds had cross-border impact and was therefore a threat to international peace and security, was seen as a tactical concession to dying traditions of state sovereignty.

What a difference ten years can make. In the spring of 1999, the picture of the world had become much fuzzier. NATO was conducting a seventy-eight-day bombing campaign over Kosovo to stop the violence of Slobodan Milošević, but that campaign had not been sanctioned by a resolution of the Security Council. The sense of hope and unity that had briefly existed in the immediate aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall had been shattered by a series of failures: first, the long breakup of Yugoslavia and the inability of the international community to stop the violence that accompanied it; second, the collapse of the international humanitarian relief effort in Somalia after U.S. soldiers were killed in Mogadishu and international forces quickly ran away; and third, the genocide in Rwanda, and the passivity of the international community, which mastered the will to deploy troops to evacuate rich Westerners but not to protect poor Africans.

The arrival of the twenty-first century, and the hype that accompanied it as the big cities of the world outdid each other to celebrate the new millen-

nium, was a time of uncertainty and doubts, but not of despair. The post-cold war world had not produced the “end of history,” as Francis Fukuyama had optimistically predicted, nor had it spelled the “end of democracy” and of the nation state, as I had, a bit glibly, announced in a small book published in 1993, when I was challenging the optimism of the early 1990s. In 2000 the world was all shades of grey.

That is the time when I joined the United Nations to become the head of its peacekeeping department. I was going to turn fifty, and at the time I did not know if I would again be operationally involved in international affairs. I had held interesting positions in the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs. As the head of policy planning in the early 1990s, I had done my best to convince French leaders that the fall of the Berlin Wall was an opportunity, not a threat, and that strengthening European institutions should not be conceived as a way to contain a unified Germany but as a means for Europe to keep its relevance in a world where the end of the East-West divide spelled the end of the centrality of Europe. But my present job was quite removed from the challenges of the post-cold war era. I was a senior sitting judge in France’s highest financial court, one of its oldest institutions, the *Cour des Comptes*. It had been created by Napoleon in 1807, but its origins went back to the Middle Ages. And indeed, on solemn occasions, I would put on a long black silk robe adorned with white lace, and make various bows following a ritual that has not changed much since the seventeenth century. I had stayed involved in international affairs, attending conferences, chairing a French defense institute, teaching, and writing articles and books. I had become a commentator, and could have written a guide book on the best conference places of the world. I was trying to make an intellectual difference, but I was not sure I would. How many political scientists are remembered a century after they have written and commented on current events?

As a child of the baby boom, I witnessed the momentous transformation of France in the postwar decades. But my life was infinitely easier than that of my parents, and most important, I never experienced war. War was an abstraction in the peaceful Western Europe of the 1950s and 1960s, and the bomb sirens that blew every first Thursday of the month to test the systems were a quaint reminder that there had been other periods in the history of Europe. The only time when I had a vague sense that this nice world could unravel was during the Cuban missile crisis. But most of the time, I had a protected and privileged life. I was immersed in a world of writers and free spirits who cared about ideas, not money, and that made schoolwork effortless. With that family background, I

should have become a professor, or I could have remained a sitting judge with a beautiful black silk robe. But I did not want to.

Throughout the 1990s, I had been reflecting on the historical experience of the twentieth century, which had had such a defining role for my parents. We usually learn the wrong lessons of history, and fight the last war. The generation of my father was broken by the experience of World War I. The world powers of the time stumbled into a war they expected to be quick and clean but that turned out to be long and dirty. And when new threats emerged in the 1930s, the fear of stumbling into another devastating war led many European intellectuals to pacifism and contributed to the initial weak response to Hitler. My father was ambivalent. He was a strong antifascist and distanced himself from some of his pacifist friends. But it was not until World War II broke out that he realized, as did my mother (the two had not yet met), that peace is not always an absolute goal, and that sometimes freedom is worth a fight. My father was wary of military power, wary of force, wary of the advice of generals.

Working on East-West relations and nuclear deterrence in the 1980s, I had developed a very different view of the world. Just as my father's view had been shaped by World War I, mine was shaped by World War II. What World War II had shown was that weakness was never a good response to force. Force had to be met by force. Since war supposedly had become too destructive to be waged, the abstract conceptual game of nuclear deterrence had been invented. I admired the writings of Tom Schelling, and as a young expert I was thrilled to attend meetings with Albert Wohlstetter, whom I considered to be one of the most brilliant strategic analysts of our time. I had a hawkish position when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, and I felt closer to the group of American analysts who would later become the "neocons," such as Paul Wolfowitz—whose intellectual curiosity I have always admired—than to détente peaceniks. I was happy to play a minor role in encouraging the French government to give support to the mujahedin in Afghanistan even before the United States launched a huge program that would eventually contribute to the withdrawal of Soviet forces but also would help build up the Taliban. For me the collapse of the Soviet Union vindicated such hard-nose policies. My view of the world was "Kissingerian," shaped by big powers in a strategic game where local factors have little relevance. In 1989–90 my world was still one of dangerously big ideas.

As the post-cold war world unfolded, I began to suspect that this view of the world was too neat and clear-cut. It assumed too much control on the part of governments and states. It ignored human passions and the frailty of many states. I became more and more suspicious of traditional state institutions,

which I saw as gradually bypassed by new, nongovernmental actors: corporations, non-profit organizations, rebel movements, and also new transnational institutions like the European Commission. My cold war worldview had also assumed too much moral clarity. As children of World War II and of the cold war, my cohorts and I did not have the doubts of the generation that followed World War I. We thought we had a clear moral compass. We knew what was good and what was evil. Although there had been circumstances in which we had to bend our principles to strategic expediency, which sometimes had meant supporting dictators during the cold war, we never envisaged that the world could be so messy that there could be conflicting goals that were equally good. It was one thing to accept that sometimes the ends justified the means, even if the means were questionable. It was quite another to find out that good ends might be in conflict with each other—that, for instance, the legitimate desire of a human community to run its own affairs could conflict with the legitimate desire for peace and stability, or that the admirable desire of some to show solidarity to human beings at risk might be perceived as a threat by others, and not only by nasty dictators. Good intentions might not always produce good results.

In many ways, such questions should have kept me away from the United Nations and peacekeeping. I had written a book expressing my skepticism about the continued relevance of nation states. How could I work for an organization composed of nation states? How could part of my job be to help consolidate fragile states? I had growing doubts about the capacity of major nations to come together coherently, and I would have as my boss the Security Council. I questioned the clarity of moral goals in the world of international politics, and I would become a self-righteous international civil servant working for the good of humankind.

In addition, I had no direct work experience with the United Nations. Once, when I was the head of the French policy planning staff and was passing through New York, the French mission had given me a pass to have access to the small room where the Security Council holds its private consultations, a room where I would spend so much time in later years. I have no recollection of the topic that was then being discussed, but I remember vividly my surprise, and—if I may say—my disappointment. I had expected some solemn and orderly chamber, and what I saw was a cramped little space, with not enough seats for all the people present. The ambassadors were huddled around the table, but they did not look like my idea of ambassadors. The whole place looked more like one of those small auction rooms I used to visit in Paris, or worse, like some kind of clandestine parlor where card players

play unauthorized games. It did not look like the keystone of the international system. So much for my first personal experience of the United Nations.

When, in early 2000, the French government put me on the shortlist of candidates submitted to Secretary General Kofi Annan for the position of under secretary general in charge of peacekeeping, I was not at all sure that the combination of diplomatic, military, and management experience that I would bring to the job would outweigh my lack of UN experience. But I certainly wanted the job more than my competitors because I saw it as a unique opportunity to change my life by having for the first time the opportunity to change the lives of others. That intuition was right, but I had no idea of the magnitude of the personal challenges I would have to face. As I was preparing for the interviews in New York, I wanted to compensate for my lack of direct UN experience by absorbing all the information I could. I read the reports on Srebrenica and on Rwanda; I read the publications on peacekeeping. I read painfully boring reports produced by the bureaucracy of the UN—reports in which everything said is factually correct and yet where nothing really stimulates fresh thinking. I am not sure that I have really been able to change that. I read the more accessible book by William Shawcross, *Deliver Us from Evil*, to get a better understanding of the man who might be my future boss, Kofi Annan. All that reading prepared me well for the interviews that I went through, along with the other candidates, in May 2000. I had acquired an intellectual idea of peacekeeping, and I was sufficiently well-informed of the tragedies of the 1990s to understand the ever-looming dangers of peacekeeping.

As I was interviewing for the job, a severe crisis almost brought down the peacekeeping mission in Sierra Leone. A peace agreement had been broken by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), a cruel rebel faction that had made a habit of chopping off arms of members of rival groups. Hundreds of peacekeepers, who had not been prepared for the challenge, had been taken hostage. I felt sorry for my predecessor, Bernard Miyet, a French diplomat. I spoke to him as one does to a gravely ill person, with a mix of visible concern, to show sympathy, and fake optimism, to be reassuring. He laughed at my concerned look and showed an optimism that did not sound fake; he told me that he had just spoken to the press, and that everything would be fine. He suggested that this was just one day in the life of peacekeeping. And one had to take it in stride. I wondered at the time whether I was the right person for the job, or whether my judgment was right. In that particular case, my predecessor was right. Although two key troop contributors—India and Jordan—eventually pulled out, the mission, after a daring operation conducted by Indian troops and with the help of British Special Forces, did recover. The hostages were

freed, Pakistani troops replaced Indian troops, and Sierra Leone eventually became a success story.

What I did not see, and the optimistic character of Bernard Miyet did not help me there, is that the way in which the international community, the Security Council, and the Secretariat of the United Nations interact puts a unique responsibility on the secretary general of the United Nations and the under secretary general for peacekeeping. I would have to learn through experience that an international civil servant has a lot of company when success comes, but is a very lonely person in times of trouble.

I did not know, in those crisp sunny days of May 2000, that I would spend eight years of my life in the position I was interviewing for—the longest commitment of my career—and that those eight years would be, in some ways, eight years of solitude.

Why do I write today? Peacekeeping is an enormous managerial challenge, which has some lessons for all sorts of unrelated activities; as a particularly risky activity, it is a never-ending exercise in risk management and decisionmaking in an environment of uncertainty. As an activity that brings together very different national and professional cultures, it is an exercise in building a team and mobilizing very diverse human beings for a common goal. There were many days of crisis during those eight years, many days that were just like the one in May 2000, another day in the life of peacekeeping. Why not just smile like my predecessor and let others find out for themselves? I actually believe that I may have gained a few insights that could be of interest not just to those who are engaged in peacekeeping—and their number has been continuously growing since 2000—but also to those who want to operate effectively in a world that is being redefined by the conflicting forces of globalization and fragmentation. The study of disease helps one understand a healthy body, and the study of societies that have broken up can give us some insights into how to keep societies together. It is becoming more and more evident that one of the key strategic challenges of the next twenty years actually will be how to help keep societies together, how to prevent state failure and its potentially devastating consequences.

As the international community reflects on two decades of interventions in the lives of others, and wonders whether it was worth it, the mood is very different from the one that prevailed at the beginning of the millennium. Liberal interventionists as well as neocons now have self-doubts, and in many countries public opinion is turning inward, wary of foreign adventures that look too difficult and too uncertain. The temptation is great to prefer the safety of home to the hazards of an unpredictable and maybe unmanageable world.

This book is an attempt to chart a course that eschews reckless interventionism as well as an emerging parochialism. No course of action—or inaction—is without dangers, and the prudent interventionism that I advocate will, from time to time, fail. But it is better to fail after having tried than to fail for not having tried.

The book I have decided to write is very different from the one I would have wanted to write in 2000. Not just for the obvious reason that I could not, as I was starting in my new job, formulate the questions the way I can today. The more essential difference is that I strongly believe today that I should try to tell a personal experience, that general lessons are of no relevance if they are not grounded in the specifics of a unique situation. I do not want today to be a commentator on peacekeeping but rather to convey all the uncertainties, the flaws, the false hopes, the wrong assumptions, the unnecessary fears, the fog of real action.

Before I became the head of peacekeeping, I had a reputation as an intellectual rather than as an operator. I never thought that being characterized as an intellectual should be taken as an insult, although I knew that it usually does not help a career to be called an intellectual or a thinker. It suggests that you cannot operate but does not guarantee that you really can think. Having had to become an operator, I have not lost my respect for thinking, but I do believe that a lot of the “thinking” that goes on is useless for operators. The most useless way to pretend to help is to offer detailed, specific solutions, or recipes. There are dozens of political science books that look like “how to” books. They do not have the texture of life and therefore fall off the hand. Operators do not read much. They do not have the time. I, who was an avid reader, read much less during those eight years than I used to. And the more operational I became, the less interested I was in operational books. I would rather read memoirs, history books, or real philosophy. What I needed was the fraternal companionship of other actors before me who had had to deal with confusion, grapple with the unknown, and yet had made decisions. What I also needed was the solidity of true abstraction and the harmony of good visual art (music does not do it for me; I can hardly sing the French national anthem). What I needed was, in times of difficulty, the distance of the mind.

The unfortunate truth is, however, that when you are immersed in action, you mostly live on the intellectual capital you acquired beforehand; you draw on it. You may be accumulating, in some corner of your brain, new patterns, new chains of thinking that will eventually help you, but you are not really aware of it, and you certainly do not have the time to reflect on it.

When I now reflect on what helped me most, I find it is not the knowledge that the bureaucrats who determine how to conduct an interview in the UN would characterize as “directly relevant.” What I knew about specific crisis situations, or about institutional procedures, would be quickly outdated, often insufficient, while a well-drafted note could tell me all I needed to know. What helped me, what I would not find in any note, was the philosophical and ethical framework I had acquired in my classical studies. What helped me was the historical experience of my parents, and the questions that it raised.

As the head of peacekeeping, a person whose job description includes trying to establish a relationship with a lot of unsavory characters, I had to answer in a very practical way the question that so dominated the twentieth century: How far should one go to ensure peace? And who are we to decide for others when to compromise and when not to compromise? I found that peacekeeping, far from being a cynical enterprise aimed at preserving peace at any price, can be successful only if it is understood as a highly moral enterprise. One needs a reliable compass to navigate through the fog of peace. And I found that an enterprise becomes moral not because it is a fight against evil, but because it has to consider conflicting goods, and lesser evils, and make choices. It is those dilemmas that make peacekeeping an ethical enterprise. It is those dilemmas that I would like to share with the reader.