

ME AGAINST MY BROTHER

**AT WAR IN SOMALIA,
SUDAN, AND RWANDA**

A JOURNALIST REPORTS FROM
THE BATTLEFIELDS OF AFRICA

SCOTT PETERSON

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*For those Africans at war, that their courage and spirit may
one day be put to better use building peace;*

*and for Willard S. Crow, my friend, grandfather and
traveling companion in China and the Arctic,
whose adventures set the precedent*

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INTRODUCTION

*Which are we: beasts because we make war,
or angels because we so often seek to make it
into something holy?*

—Barbara Ehrenreich, *Blood Rites*

There is a time and a place for everything “under the heavens,” the Scriptures promise. And so for every foreign correspondent there is a first time for war. This was my first time, more than a decade ago in Africa, and I was nervous. Even by African standards, there were few more remote places than the Keren Front, lodged in the heart of Eritrea in northeast Africa, a moonscape laced with trenches that harkened back to the brutalities of World War I.

In the days before I had arrived, the Eritrean guerrillas—who had already been fighting for independence for a *generation*—had repulsed a major Ethiopian army offensive. There were said to be many enemy dead. Now I was on my way, though I had never seen a dead body in my life.

My journal records how I “grew more and more apprehensive as we neared the front.” I was afraid, and my last sleepless night was spent reading Ernest Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea*. I marveled again at its exquisite writing—“two pages long, ten light years deep,” we used to joke in school—although there was little solace in the words: “‘But man is not made for defeat,’ he said. ‘A man can be destroyed, but not defeated.’”¹

We started marching to the front line at 4:30 am, before first light, but the time didn’t matter to me. In my state of anxiety, I hadn’t slept at all, nor did I feel the need. We had left at 1:30 am and had driven an impossible stony path with headlights shaded—the Eritreans made all their movements at night, to avoid bombing by Ethiopian planes. We arrived at the rear base, a cluster of underground bunkers that, inside, smelled of hard living.

Through my bleary eyes as dawn broke, the trail to the front took on a surreal quality. For one and one-half hours, we

followed a valley littered with shell casings and trees torn to splinters by heavy tank bombardment. Then we began climbing, and the trail became dotted with gauze and other bloodstained dressings. “The serum of life was splattered on the rocks,” I wrote. “The rebels did not win without casualties.”

The trench system was the top of the ridge, and the first bodies I saw were on the nearside—Ethiopian troops cut down by Eritrean gunfire as they charged the rebel trench. “Those are the ones who wanted the medals,” smirked my translator, a lady warrior called Chu-Chu. She had spent a year fighting on the front herself, and so had seen all this before. These bodies had not yet begun to swell with their own gases. But the strong wind couldn’t wipe away the sickly sweet smell of death. *Human* death. It was unique, a smell that I would become too familiar with over time but would never accept casually.

It was the everyday details that drew me in, as they still do. I knew the broad outlines of the conflict—I didn’t need to serve as witness to understand that—but what told me most were the human elements. Peering over the edge of the trench, with the Ethiopian positions on the next ridge, watching me, I could see hands sticking up out of the dirt, and boots still worn and bayonets and tufts of hair. These were people that no one would ever bother to identify.

Some Ethiopian troops had made it to the trench, then died and were buried by rebels who dug away more dirt from the sides of the trench to cover the bodies. It was among them—the bodies under the dirt that we were actually standing and crawling on—that there was a rare moment of identity. I picked up a piece of folded paper jutting out of the “bottom” of the trench, and opened it.

It was like a schoolchild’s notebook paper, ruled with perfect thin blue lines that imposed order on the unruly handwritten Amharic script. It was an unmailed letter from a soldier to his mother, and seemed to have been in a breast pocket. But it was spoiled with bloodstains and the telltale hole of a round from an AK-47 assault rifle—that through paper leaves a perfect 5.56mm ring of metallic gray residue. Opened up, the letter showed eight holes. Its writer could not have had a chance. In the proper revolutionary style demanded by the Marxist regime of dictator Mengistu Haile Mariam, it was signed “Forward Ethiopia.”

And there was the poverty of this front line that struck me, a quality common to every war zone on the continent. Boots of the dead were held together with knotted yarn, and bullet sacks were made from cut-off trouser leggings. I had forgotten my fear, in the process of trying to absorb all this. “Eritrean fighters manned the lookouts draped with strings of bullets and carrying Kalashnikovs and shoulder-held anti-tank weapons,” I wrote in a letter to *my*

mother. “They were happy to see a visitor who is growing up fast—maybe faster than he would like.”

I had made it to the front. I was feeling in control, but then I lifted my camera to record the carnage. After a few frames it jammed, bringing me right back to reality. We rushed into a wider trench section, bringing clouds of dust with us, and the rebels offered me tea while I fumbled with my camera. Here on the edge of the planet, on a ridge at war, I was being offered the quintessential hospitality of a cup of tea. Foul-tasting as it was—who knows where the water came from?—the guerrillas had prepared it using a little camp stove. Sugar came from a battered tin, and it was presented to me with a smile. The hospitality had a price: the diarrhea didn’t stop for two days.

The camera was a mess, too, and as I fiddled with it I popped the back open, with the film still in it, so that the four frames I had taken were exposed to the light and ruined. I finally got the camera working, but it was an inauspicious start.

The missive home from Eritrea was somber: “I saw my slowly budding career flash before my eyes,” I wrote, “in a nightmare of amateurism.”

Africa has always known violence and war, its soil regularly stained with the blood of its people. But the conflicts of the last ten years of the millennium have been the most vicious, have created the most suffering, and so are most worthy of examination.

At the turn of the decade in 1990, with the close of the Cold War, a new sense of optimism for peace and democracy had swept across Africa. Nelson Mandela, the African liberation leader incarnate and a source of pride throughout the continent, was released from prison on Robben Island to lead South Africa from apartheid to multiethnic rule. Ethiopia’s new president—a former rebel himself—granted Eritrea its independence, ending that war.

But with promises of inclusion in the New World Order still ringing in African ears, things fell apart elsewhere. Chaos and then famine emerged in Somalia. Peace broke down in Angola and Algeria. Civil war in Sudan, Liberia, and Burundi continued to burn. And in Rwanda, a genocide was unleashed in 1994 that, in time, would force realignments across central Africa. Many of these conflicts turned so severe that for combatants and civilians alike, Hobbesian self-survival often became the only goal.

This story was more promising elsewhere. The former Soviet satellite states in eastern Europe bid to join NATO, and Russia swallowed its pride and held out its begging bowl to the one remaining superpower, the United States. But in Africa fragile political systems continued their collapse, and human anguish intensified. Still, the “Dark Continent” never seemed to grab the

world's attention until the vital signs—as in Somalia and Rwanda—became too severe to reverse.

Of course, Africa's conflicts vary from war zone to war zone, but certain characteristics—military, human, and spiritual—mark them all. This is where my interest lies, in the dust and the sweat, and the laughter mixed with misery that permeates the flavor of war in Africa.

This is not a pretty book. It doesn't describe Africa's stunning sunsets and wild animals, nor its exceptional beauty. And it does not really have a happy ending. But this book does aim to illuminate human tragedy in a way that shows how such tragedies may be easier to avoid in Africa and beyond in the future.

Instead of telling of tented safaris, this book is an uncompromising look at the pain that so many Africans suffer under those gorgeous sunsets, the death that they meet in countries that also happen to be populated with the elephants, lions, and mountain gorillas that captivate the West. Because for every sun-drenched day, there is one of rain. For every majestic lion, there are many more sickly hyenas and vultures ready to devour the horrible things that result from violence.

I prefer to think that in Africa there is a Jungian balance between remarkable good and intense evil. But it may be more of a Manichean battle between the forces of light and dark, because as worthy of spiritual celebration as the good may be, the degree of evil is also extraordinary. So let me make clear from the start: this book is about the extremes, as they can and do exist in Africa. In that sense it is biased, because not every African nation is at war. Not every country is starving and ruled by warlords. And not every tribesman in Africa dreams of inflicting genocide upon his rival.

There are, of course, also wonderful examples of Africans prevailing. I don't mean to downplay this good and have myself experienced much hope, love, and healing in Africa—enough to easily fill the pages of another tome.

But many nations are in conflict and suffer agonies largely unrecorded. These, I believe, require exploring for what they tell us about the human capacity to conduct evil, and also to survive it. So this book is about the Dark Side, and the hope, love, and healing that sometimes emerge despite it.

This book is not a memoir. It doesn't tell cowboy tales of the front line, and then how I retired to the bar every night to better my colleagues at the telling of war *stories*—something that, for me, rarely took place. Instead, in its essence, this book is about war *crimes*, and how people come to commit them. There are many crimes here, and do not think that the culprits are limited to Africans. American and other foreign forces in Somalia committed startling acts of savagery, hiding behind the banner of the United Nations; French authorities and some church officials in Rwanda were complicit in

genocide—not to mention the shameful indifference, then hobbling of a ready-to-act UN Security Council by a gun-shy United States.

Questions of justice—even in a continent where the idea of a war crimes tribunal and accountability is so very new—should be paramount. Failure to address this issue will mean that more Africans themselves must answer this question, as it was put by the president of Burundi in August 1994, after the slaughter of 2,000 people in a town:

“How long is blood going to have to flow in this country?” he asked, attempting to deflate tensions.

“What do you gain when you start killing and shedding blood? Can you drink it? Can you make bricks from it? Who has ever benefited from blood running in the streets?”²

Spiritual journeys do not always start out as such, and mine in Africa certainly did not. Since I marched anxiously toward the front line in Eritrea in 1989—writing letters home about profound changes in my thinking—I have covered many other conflicts in Africa, the Balkans, and the Middle East.

In those days as a writer, I was driven by the ambitious precedent laid down by William Faulkner in his 1950 Nobel Prize acceptance speech. An especially perceptive English teacher gave me a copy before I could fully appreciate its importance. I kept it folded in my shoulder bag on early journeys. Faulkner advised the “young writer” to leave

no room in his workshop for anything but the old verities and truths of the heart, the old universal truths lacking which any story is ephemeral and doomed—love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice. Until he does so, he labors under a curse. He writes not of love but of lust, of defeats in which nobody loses anything of value, of victories without hope and worst of all without pity or compassion. His griefs grieve on no universal bones, leaving no scars. He writes not of the heart but of the glands.³

Armed with such teachings, I set off at the end of 1988 for Africa. I made two trips that took the greater part of two years: the first traveling overland north to south from Cairo to Cape Town; the second in the opposite direction, from Johannesburg to Algiers. I sent freelance stories along the way to the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* and the British newspapers—whoever would have them. But my first war experiences in Eritrea and Sudan, then Mozambique and Angola, made clear how much there was to learn about the human spirit in Africa.

My original aim in Africa was to simply be an observant tourist—to have an adventure that might yield an interesting travelogue, or *something*. I had just graduated from Yale University with a double major in English and East Asian Studies. I had studied Chinese and traveled to China twice—the first time with my grandfather, who as my companion became the subject of the first story I ever wrote. Over time, I considered being a foreign correspondent. Since I expected to spend much of my career in Asia, I thought a two-month journey to Africa might be a change of scene.

But that innocent start slowly turned into a different journey altogether. I was becoming hooked on war, on the emotions it inspired and forced me to confront.

So when I flicked on my radio at a border post on the Niger-Algeria frontier, during a motorcycle trek across the Sahara Desert on 2 August 1990, and heard that Iraqi strongman Saddam Hussein had invaded Kuwait, it soon became clear that a new war would be taking place in the Middle East. *The Sunday Telegraph* in London agreed to base me in Cyprus, and I worked as a stringer from there in Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, and especially northern Iraq. I was relegated to Damascus during most of the Gulf War in early 1991, envious of my colleagues in Saudi Arabia and Iraq who were seeing the “real” war.

But I had my break in the spring, when Iraqi Kurds staged a rebellion. As the Gulf War drew to a close, President George Bush had indicated that toppling Saddam was up to the Iraqis, though any attempt from inside would have American help. The administration later denied making any such promise, but the Iraqis took the advice to heart.

A colleague, Peter Bakogeorge, and I resolved to get in. At a remote border village we paid Kurdish guides \$800 to find safe passage into Iraq. I carried only the essentials: a thin Kevlar flak jacket; a gas mask (there were fears that Saddam would use gas to put down the insurrection, and in fact Iraqi forces *did* use mustard gas then against Shiite Muslim rebels in the south); loads of film; and a kilo and a half of oily black olives.

We left at night on a smugglers’ route and got past Turkish troops that were on heightened alert because of the annual spring offensive of the PKK, Turkey’s own separatist Kurdish rebels. We came across the concrete post marking the border—and saw the mines glinting in the moonlight. Even then I knew we were taking far too many risks. Unbeknownst to us, a BBC television crew had been killed the day before by their guide, apparently following this same route. We spent a dangerous and fearful night in a smugglers’ cave and the next morning were delivered into the hands of the Iraqi Kurds, the *peshmerga* guerrillas.

Within days we had caught up with the front line. To be close to a satellite phone, Peter hooked up with a Kurdish leader. But after all these months of

buildup and now with Baghdad already capitulated to US forces, I was determined to see whatever action remained. I hitchhiked alone beyond the town of Arbil, across a broad, grassy plain, and I found the war. Iraqi tank shells were falling like rain, as Kurdish rebels stood in small groups and argued about what to do. Baghdad had turned the tide and was pushing back the rebellion. The rebels began to retreat, and I too was crammed into a four-wheel drive vehicle. We drove wildly fast, and leaning out the window I saw why: two Iraqi helicopters were overhead, firing their rockets. I was struck with a queasy dread. We screeched to a halt, and the *peshmerga* jumped out and uselessly emptied their magazines at the helicopters.

I ran around, frantically trying to capture the moment on film and looking for cover. There was none, but what I saw in the midst of this firefight has enlightened my reporting ever since: even as we were being rocketed, even as Baghdad was crushing the rebellion, American jet fighters flew high overhead, watching everything and doing nothing to intervene. I had heard Bush's promise to help the Kurds and Shiites and had taken it as one. But that promise was being ignored. It was my first experience of American foreign policy gone tragically wrong, in a place very far from Washington. It prepared me for serious US mistakes later in Somalia and Rwanda.

I had to flee northern Iraq, along with 1.5 million Kurds. As we trekked overland back into Turkey, the question on my lips was the same asked me repeatedly by the Kurds, who had put so much store in a promise from America: "Where's Bush?"

After the Gulf War, I moved back to Africa and was taken on by *The Daily Telegraph* in London. Not staff, but well enough cared for and "retained," like all the Africa correspondents for British papers based in Nairobi, Kenya. It felt good to be back on my old stomping ground, and I expected to be covering an anticipated blossoming of democracy across the continent. That was not to be—I never once, in fact, wrote a story about democracy there. Instead, over the next four years I witnessed the violent upheavals that I attempt to portray in the following pages.

There was still so much to learn, and little did I expect that the laboratory of war in Africa would virtually renew our understanding of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: War, Famine, Pestilence, and Death.

Back then I was still a believer in the goodwill of institutions and governments and was convinced that if they knew that bad things were happening in Africa, they would try to intervene. The world was getting to be a smaller place, and so ignorance was no longer a valid argument for inaction, when presented with evidence of crimes. It had been that way for some time. More than a century ago, after all, the head of the Red Cross, Gustave Moynier,

rejoiced that knowledge would be the best weapon against wrongdoing. Writing in 1885, he said, "These days we know what is going on in every corner of the globe. News of the slightest skirmish spreads like wildfire, all but putting the dying on the battlefield in front of the reader."⁴

Of course, news today is live and instantaneous. With satellite technology, there is nowhere we can't be, and no place where television can't report. But as the examples of China's Tiananmen Square, Somalia, Bosnia, Rwanda, Chechnya, Kosovo, and East Timor show, such immediate news does more to appall than to spur timely intervention. The case of Rwanda's genocide in 1994 may have been the most outrageous: that bloodletting went on for 100 days and went almost unremarked by American and other Western leaders, who were more worried about its impact on their midterm elections and about avoiding legal obligations to intervene if they even *used* the dreaded, loaded "G"-word: genocide. Rwanda was the proof, one relief agency noted, that "we could have been watching Auschwitz live."⁵

What does it take to provoke action? If Rwanda is any measure, then I would agree with this analysis: that action may require "the collapse of continents rather than single states; oceans of dead rather than mere rivers—with repercussions that significantly affect rich countries as well as poor."⁶

This book shows how Africa's recent catastrophes have not been inevitable. Preventive action—coupled with a better understanding of Africa itself—could have averted much suffering. These conflicts do not arise out of some uniquely "African" weakness. Instead, they have often been made worse by wrongheaded foreign intervention. Learning the lessons will be critical to understanding modern conflicts in Africa and how the United States, the United Nations, and Africans themselves failed—and continue to fail—to bring peace. The difficulties posed by foreign intervention are valuable far beyond Africa's borders.

I have detailed Somalia's descent into clan conflict and the war against American troops, the spiritual and power-hungry excesses that spur Sudan's endless holy war, and a case of horrific transgression against the human spirit: the genocide in Rwanda.

There may seem little more connecting these three conflicts than a shared continent. This is true. They show very different facets of war, types of outside influence and intervention, and yield different lessons. Yet taken together, they give a good picture of the modern African experience of conflict.

Still, there are threads. War crimes are the most obvious. And the disastrous US policy in Somalia, for example—the most formative post-Cold War foreign debacle for America so far—led directly to another disastrous, shameful US policy of genocide denial in Rwanda.

In Somalia, famine and the fighting were first ignored, then neglected.

Eventually media images of the suffering were so powerful that the UN—and eventually the US—overreacted. This was going to be the test case of the New World Order. Iraq had just been driven out of Kuwait in 1991, in a stunning and bloodless (for the US-led allies) victory, which overnight swept away the memory of 58,000 dead American GIs in the mud and jungle of Vietnam. Iraq was a *modern* war, in which high tech came into its own. Military censors—even self-censorship by some news editors—meant that few images of the thousands of Iraqi deaths were shown in America. So the precedent had been set: here was a huge set-piece battle of armor on armor, the type of which may never be seen again.

And almost nobody died.

So expectations were high for an aid mission to Somalia—an infinitely lesser problem than the oil-important Gulf—and it should have been easy. Instead, on the American watch, the Mogadishu Line was drawn and crossed: the humanitarian mission—“God’s work,” as President Bush liked to say—chose sides in a local battle and became Somalia’s chief warlord.

In Sudan, a civil war that has boiled along for most of the second half of the century has intensified in the past decade with a fresh injection of religious fervor. Cursed by the fact that there has been no defining moment to force closure to the crisis, Sudanese on both sides of the front line have fallen into a chronic rhythm of conflict virtually impenetrable from the outside. The fragmentation of the southern, African rebel group has caused yet more destruction and insecurity. The UN for years has carried out an interminable relief effort, and though it may have succeeded in saving lives, it also has prolonged the war by feeding the combatants.

In Rwanda, the lessons are different yet again. Here the signs of preparation for genocide were clear enough to anybody who cared to look. Thanks largely to American pressure to avoid “another Somalia,” the killing was allowed to rage unchecked, then to burn itself out. Washington made sure that the UN force already there—which demonstrably could have saved tens of thousands of lives—was cut back to a skeleton force, sending a clear message to Rwanda’s murderers that they could act with impunity.

So Rwanda was abandoned as the UN retreated. Then in the aftermath, the West added shame upon shame: as more than 1 million Hutus crossed *en masse* to Zaire, goaded by the organizers of genocide, who hid among them, the reaction to feed and care and relieve these people was immediate. Overnight, history was altered. These people—many of them intimately involved in the slaughter—became the “victims” of the genocide and were worthy of our help.

The result in the Rwandan camps, as it has been in Somalia and Sudan, was that professional do-gooders were routinely compromised by their own

humane intentions. And Africa's warlords have taken full advantage. Civilians are the target of atrocities, and armed groups steal relief supplies, manipulate aid to further their war aims, and kill relief workers when they don't get their way. Hobbes would have been fascinated by the brutal universe in which so many Africans now struggle to get by, in which every man must fight for himself. For deep in Africa's darkneses, armed "fighters" abuse without reason, accountable to no one.

I don't consider myself to be a war junkie, flitting from front line to front line like a shit-eating bluebottle fly to feast on the gore of war, only hunting for the "worst" image or the most gruesome photograph to send to an uncomprehending audience that is already overexposed to violence. When I left Africa in mid-1995, I moved to the Balkans, where the final throes of a long-running war that brought us the phrase "ethnic cleansing" were winding down. Serbs had just sacked the UN "safe haven" of Srebrenica in Bosnia, ridding it of Muslims. The Croatian army kicked the Serbs out of the Krajina region. And the first and only action I saw was from Mount Igman above Sarajevo in August, when NATO planes bombed Bosnian Serb positions to break the three-year siege of the city. Then it was coverage of the Dayton peace deal and the unearthing of evidence for the War Crimes Tribunal on the Former Yugoslavia.

Revealing those crimes reminded me of the injustices I had seen committed in Africa, and how so little had been done—as if a decision had been made, somewhere, that Africa and Africans were not worth justice. In South Africa, the homemade Truth and Reconciliation Commission had helped heal deep trauma by digging for the truth. Ethiopia also conducted its own war crimes tribunal. But for the biggest crime of all, The International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, based in Arusha, Tanzania, got off to a shaky and underfinanced start.

After a year in the Balkans, during which I switched allegiances from the *Telegraph* to *The Christian Science Monitor*, I moved to Jordan to be the Middle East correspondent. Fascinating as these entrenched conflicts are, they are so ingrained that they are largely stale. To get at Mideast hatreds, you have to dig deeper and plumb histories that are as myth-ridden and prejudiced as those in the Balkans. Real hand-to-hand combat today is gone, and even flash points like Hebron are localized, where Israelis with guns and Palestinians with stones carry out set-piece running battles. Watching on television, you might think that the entire West Bank was aflame. But except in the rarest cases, you yourself can engage in these battles as a journalist, requiring a bulletproof vest, or take ten paces back and return to calm normality.

The minutiae of the Arab-Israeli peace process—detailed *ad nauseam* in

the world's press—is often meaningless. But staid as this may be, relative to Africa, it is progress. Wouldn't a Somali, or Sudanese, or Rwandan prefer being bored reading about a fitful peace process than be consumed by full-blooded war?

One thing that should be understood is that the glamorous mythology that surrounds the life of the foreign correspondent is exactly that, a myth. For self-declared war correspondents, or even reluctant, *de facto* ones, certainly there are exceptional moments. I understand the words of the young Winston Churchill, when he wrote that “nothing in life is so exhilarating as to be shot at without result.”

But a look at the figures makes clear that there is much else besides, especially in Africa. Endless hours are spent getting from place to place: waiting in airports or driving for days—as I did to get to the Keren Front—on back-breaking roads. Most of the rest of your time is spent churning out your report, and then—at least before the advent of the personal satellite phones—wasted trying to “get a line” to London or New York or wherever. The remaining fraction is divided further: of course there are interesting people to speak to and miracles to see—but add in feeling awful for lack of nourishment, from sleep to food, and all the while with your senses under constant assault. It can be, and in Africa it often is, painful.

And then, if you are in the right place at the right time, it may be that Churchill's “exhilaration” could happen to you—provided, of course, that you don't actually get shot.

There are other drawbacks. “We journalists are like garbage cans,” Leon Uris notes. “Everybody sends us their filth. Through us comes all that is rotten in man.”⁷ So there are many coping mechanisms. But it is impossible not to be affected. Worn down by atrocities in Somalia, where he was a British official, Gerald Hanley knew how destructive the daily dose could be: “It was obvious that you could not live in violence and threat for overlong periods and not be diverted into those side lanes of fear and doubt. It was all too personal, too close, too tiring to one's reverence for charity, and pity.”⁸

So I'm afraid that, if *Me Against My Brother* were to be shown on television, it would require a disclaimer often used for much weaker material: *We must warn you that what you are about to see includes graphic images that some may find offensive.*

But I make no apologies for the reality I found and for describing it as I saw it. It should tear at your heart and make you angry, very angry, as it does me, that such crimes are committed in Africa by Africans against each other and by outsiders at Africans' expense.

Along the way, I lost several friends and colleagues. Some are mentioned in

the following pages, attacked and murdered by mobs or killed by stray and not-so-stray bullets. It is something that happens when one crosses the invisible line—unwittingly or not—that separates an observer from a combatant. A few of those lost friends were searching in Africa, like me, for something universal, something that was not just about the mystery of being African and at war, but that illuminated mysteries about *us*.

Writing this book has been a lot like traveling in Africa. It has been difficult. No part of it came easily. But there have been moments for me of epiphany and triumph, as well as those of great despair. There have been tears, too, that came unbidden in solitude.

When I hear the thumping of helicopter rotor blades today, a clench of *something* wells up in my throat, and I am transported back to Mogadishu, to the US airborne forces that crisscrossed that city day and night for months. Even while writing parts of this book at an isolated ranch at the base of Mt. Kenya soon after the events, when barn swallows made high-velocity swoops past my head, I heard the whistle-pop of a bullet just missing. Fireworks displays from a distance, to me, are volleys of mortar fire.

The act of writing has partly expunged those memories, shedding light on them, cleansing them, boiling them down to moments of essential emotion and value. Mysteries remain, of course. For despite the scale of this odyssey, I have only two eyes. And as much as these eyes may have seen, there is so, so much more in Africa and beyond that they have not.

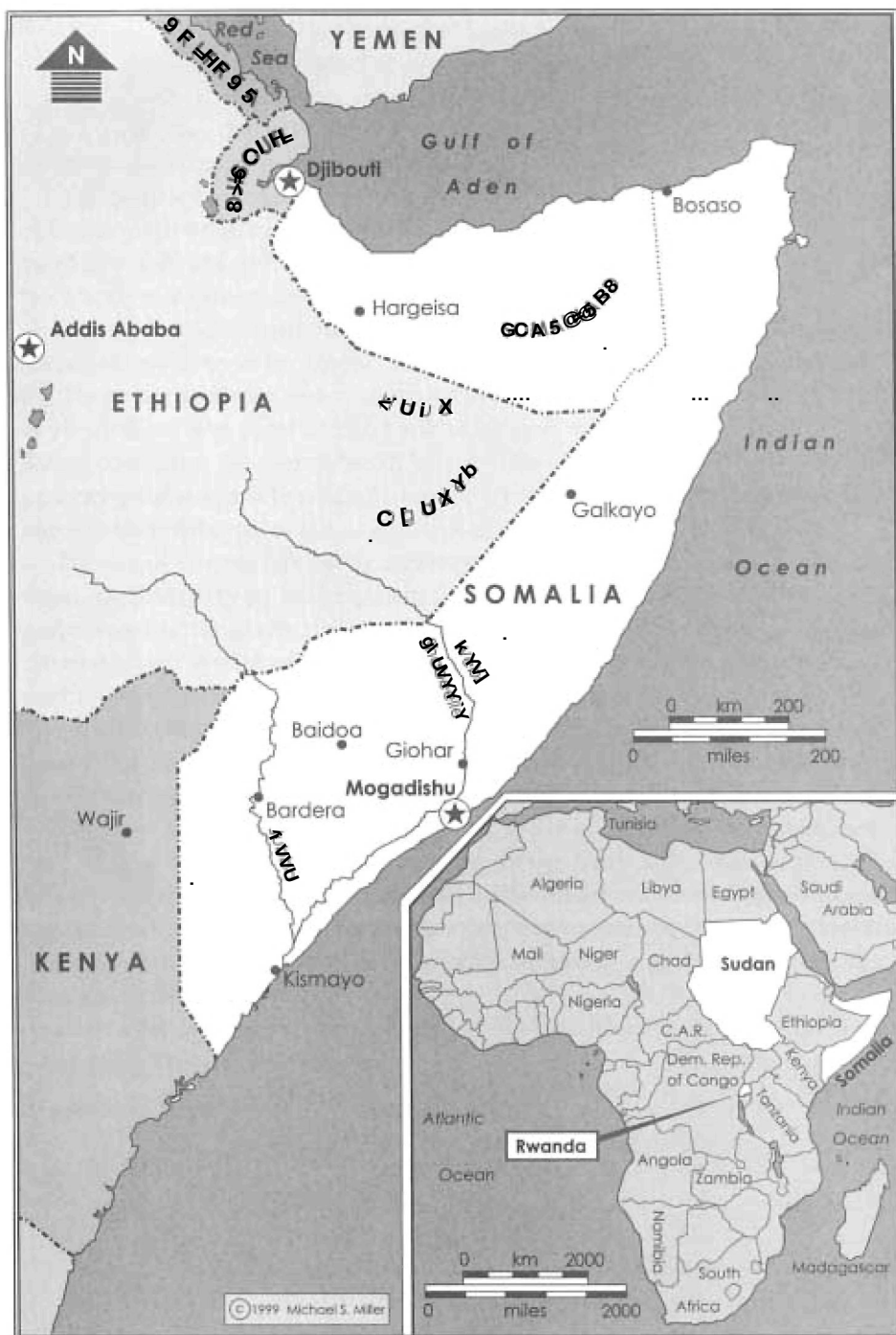
Africa is the cradle of mankind, the place where life began. And it is also a place where human emotion can be as strong as God's Word. For me, Africa is all these things, and in this way I admit to a love affair that will last. Africans are imbued with a defiant spirit, as we all are, but like few others, they face an uncertain future. The history of the Dark Side, some of which I record here, is powerful. And to prevail in the future will not be easy. But the cost of more stumbling is great and is evident in the warm, loving embrace of every mother. Must this legacy of suffering be passed on, like a bludgeoning, inescapable inheritance?

I can't get away from the sensibility of William Wordsworth, and the high price of failure:

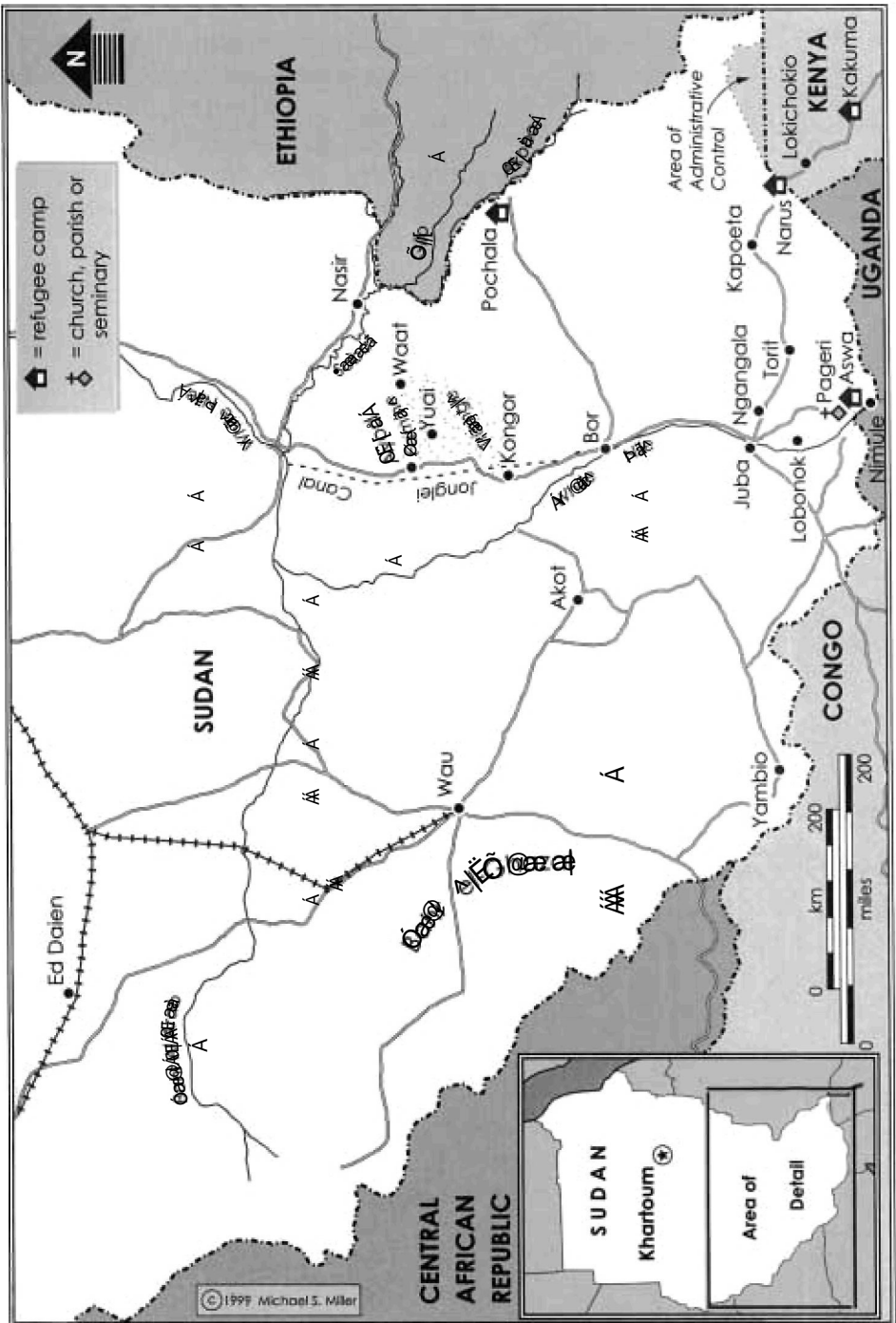
A simple child,
That lightly draws its breath . . .
What should it know of death?"⁹

MAPS

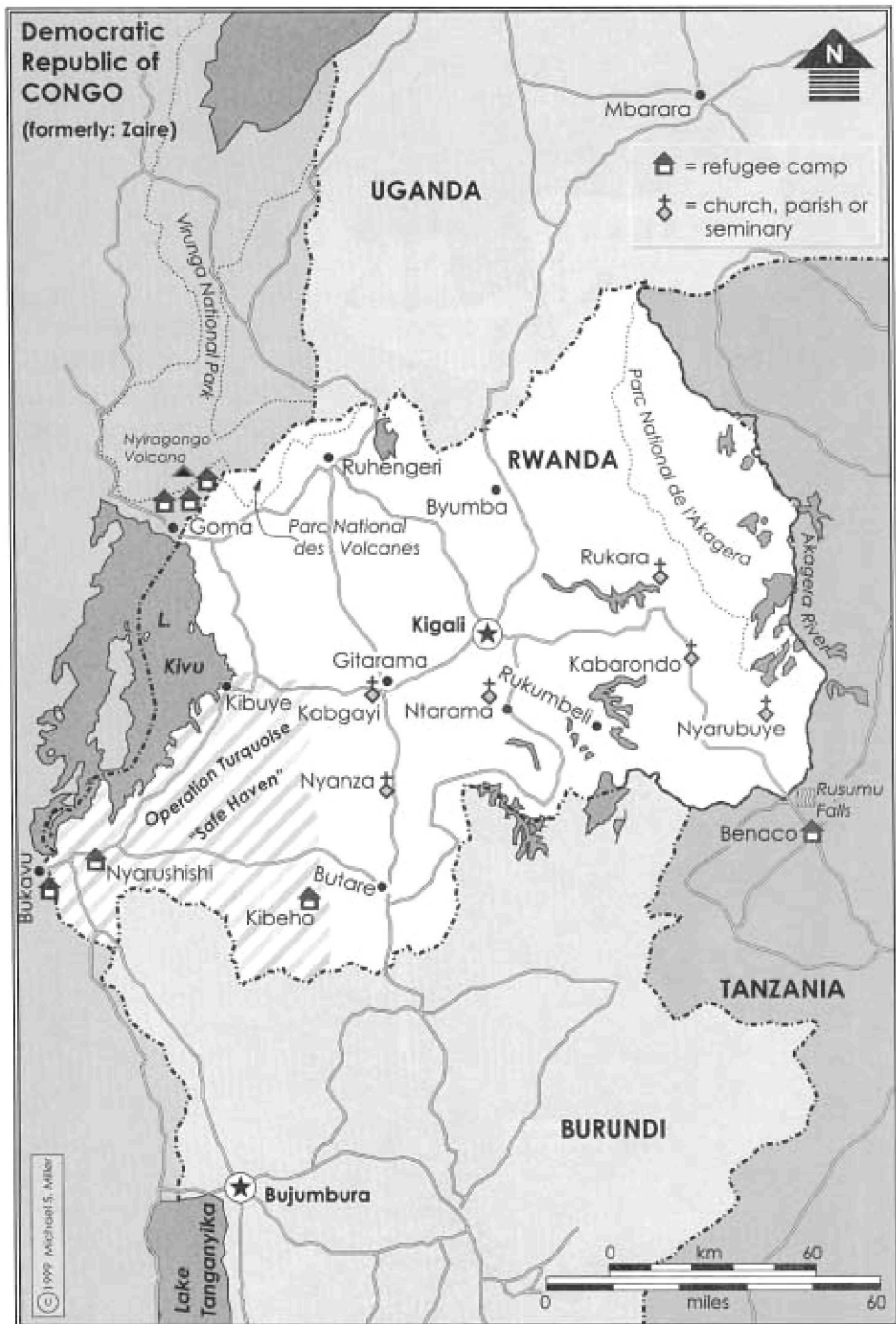
SOMALIA



SUDAN



RWANDA



PART I

SOMALIA

WARLORDS TRIUMPHANT



*Me and my clan against the world;
Me and my family against my clan;
Me and my brother against my family;
Me against my brother.*

—The hierarchy of priorities,
as ordered by a Somali proverb

LAWS OF WAR

*But of all the races of Africa there cannot be one
better to live among than the most difficult,
the proudest, the bravest, the vainest, the
most merciless, the friendliest; the Somalis.*

—Gerald Hanley, *Warriors*

The morning turned hot, but kept still; too early for anyone's bile to rise, too early to show anger. Nevertheless, Abdi Kadir sat resentful in a derelict tea stall, his worn assault rifle by his side. Already he was enraged today. The journalists he had escorted to this southern Somali town had been too demanding, too dismissive of his youth, and too ready to command him and to complain. It had been as though he was not a gunman, not worthy of respect despite the violence that his childish fingers could inflict. The sweet dark tea trickled down his throat, soothing his empty stomach.

They had wanted to move from Bardera that morning in September 1992, but they were delayed because he had forgotten to fill the vehicle with fuel. They shouted abuse, swearing, offending his fragile pride. The money for compliance was good: a total of \$300 each day, split between Abdi, two other gunmen, and the owner of the land cruiser. Most of the journey had been fun, rich with pleasure and deep laughter. But how quickly that had changed.

Abdi looked out the stall door, his narrow features struck head-on by the sun. Dust coated everything. A sour sweat spread between his skin and the metal of the uncomfortable chair. He controlled his emotion, a latent antagonism checked so far but simmering, ready to boil up with the heat of the day. Abdi was with the other gunmen, far from the car. So what if

these journalists were late again and missed their plane out of Somalia? May they never see Heaven, he cursed. God willing, *Inshallah*.

Then around the corner ran the bald one, the British journalist—was his name Sam?—whose rage reddened his shaven head. Sam was howling. They were late, the plane was already at the airstrip a few kilometers away. Unconcerned, Abdi had seen it land, churning a hurricane of dust, as he quietly sipped his tea. For the two journalists, it was to be their escape; now they were going to miss it.

“Let’s go! Let’s go! LET’S GO!” screamed Sam, the one twisted vein in his forehead swollen. Without waiting for a reply, he turned and ran back to the car.

So Abdi and his men reluctantly left the dregs of their tea, took up their weapons, and strode along behind. At the land cruiser, I was locked out too and provided more abuse. Abdi spat.

Sam Kiley of *The Times* (London) and I had come to Bardera to speak to a warlord and to get a feel for an expanding relief operation. The 1992 famine was in full flower, and for looting gunslingers life had never been so rewarding. I had been coming to Somalia for more than a year, and we were both well versed in the rigors of this conflict.

But this was a special and expensive trip. We had driven south from the capital, Mogadishu, navigating minefields and coming across food convoys being looted at gunpoint. At the start, we were so happy to be “on the road” outside Mogadishu that we lit up cigars—cheap King Edwards, thanks to my freelance budget—and enjoyed the passing desert. In Bardera we’d already seen enough, and we were more than ready to get out. So Abdi’s deliberate messing about made us angry.

Racing to the airstrip, Sam announced that if we missed the plane, no one would be paid. Abdi’s vehemence deepened, his thin fingers quivering at such ingratitude, his protests lost in the rush of contempt. The vehicle wheeled onto the airstrip, but it was too late. Rotors whining, the UN relief plane had taxied to the far end and turned. Our rage blotting out our reason, we ordered the car to speed into the flight path in a desperate bid to signal the pilots. Our protests were drowned finally by the roar of the plane overhead and then dust as the plane’s wheels lifted. Sam sunk his fist into Abdi’s side, grunting more threats and finally crossing an imaginary line in Abdi’s mind that separated insult from crime. Abdi was ready to kill, would have been happy to kill.

Then there was silence, as we slowed; the dust settled around us like fine snow, muffling noise.

“That’s it. No money,” Sam said contemptuously.

Abdi’s face leered through the cloud. Something snapped, as it had done

for so many Somalis so many times during the civil war, as their country collapsed. In such times here, as elsewhere in Africa and beyond, an armed man's rage percolated close to the surface, ready to move forcefully to ensure survival. Brazen hostility demanded a hostile reaction. And who were these foreign bastards who find me, Abdi the Prideful, so useless? I must prove that I am a *gun man*, unassailable, able to unleash quick revenge. I will draw the strength from my bloodline, a strength that—in this desert wilderness of my birth—demands vengeance, to defend honor.

Calm. The threat of fiscal punishment hung heavily as Abdi's private vow to secure justice poisoned his thoughts. Then another plane landed unexpectedly, causing both sides to bristle for the dispute. I loaded my bag onto the German Hercules and returned for Sam's duffel. But a scuffle erupted, immediately turning dangerous. Abdi was poised beside the car, menacing us with his weapon.

"Pay us the money—I need all of it!" he shouted, like a knife-wielding street kid afraid that he would not be taken seriously. Abdi's face crumpled beyond its years into deep lines, his pursed lips hiding for a moment the crazed wide grin that had adorned it for the past three days, laughing and scowling at once through polished white teeth. Every day he chewed the narcotic leaf qat, like a cow emasculating its cud. The succulent stems of *Catha edulis* are a stimulant like Benzedrine, and habit forming to chew. Over time his teeth would be darkly stained, but now in his youth they were innocent. The lips split again, teeth flashing brightly in anticipation of conflict.

"No way," Sam told him. "You have wasted our time. We're lucky to get out of here at all." The Germans unloaded ten tons of relief food, meant to help save the lives of Somalis made miserable by the reign of warlords and militia, by tempestuous gunmen like Abdi. These were the predators that made Somalis suffer, the militiamen who foraged to survive, abusing and looting at whim.

With the ability at his fingertips to end this argument *now*, Abdi turned bold. I reached for Sam's bag and Abdi also grabbed hold, his free right hand expertly double-clicking his Kalashnikov from safety to semi- to full automatic. Abdi felt confident, strong and blinded by rage at these impudent, cheap, weaponless foreigners. He swung the gun to my temple and laid his finger on the trigger. He then nodded at comrade Daher, a wild character who was skinny and older with dirty hair and teeth well stained with weed. Daher made his point by hoisting a heavy .30-caliber Browning machine gun to his hips. His scrawny body sagged under the weight of a bandolier of 300 rounds draped over his shoulders too, every sinew required just to hold this weapon aloft, never mind fire it. Daher's scarred face dripped with effort; he vowed to kill Sam.

Shouting intensified. The German flight crew were ready to depart, and they wound up their engines. But I didn't let go, and Sam didn't move. We were so angry at this blackmail that something irrational snapped inside me, as it had Abdi, causing a foolish reaction. But what else was there? Abdi and his men wouldn't hesitate to fire. They could hardly wait.

"Shoot me! Shoot me! Just SHOOT ME, you fuckers!" I bellowed, my voice increasing in pitch and in strength. My arms shook, my eyes jumping from one weapon to the other. "Let's go, Sam," I said, less sure. Abdi was amused at this pathetic defiance.

"Pay, or we *will* kill you!" Abdi shouted, an edge to every word. But a hint of hesitation was there. We wouldn't die.

We needed to be on that plane—it was our last chance out—but the Germans waved goodbye. This was not their problem. Sam and I reached for our wallets. To add insult, we paid in smaller bills. Abdi wanted new hundred-dollar notes. Frustrated at this further extortion, we talked hard but gave in, outgunned. Our patience had run out, and the Germans were sealing the aircraft door. Abdi demanded more cash, though this was never part of the deal. I wrestled with the bag gripped by Abdi's knotted fist. The Somali finally let me have it.

"No, no, no, NO! You've had enough, you thieving bastards!" I growled, as an unthinking final shot. Abdi's anger rose further, but this time he stopped. These ones would be back in Mogadishu before long, he thought, and I will get more then. This calculation made, he declared his friendship, which we did not reciprocate. The gunman and his cohorts—their "security" job done—drove away through the sand blizzard of the propellers, Abdi Kadir feeling the fresh wad of dollars in his pocket, happy at last.

Sam was not happy, and neither was I, as we climbed aboard the plane. Here was yet one more lesson of outsiders being abused by arrogant and ungrateful Somalis, a lesson that every foreign do-gooder who would come to Somalia should learn, but often perilously neglected.

"I just can't fucking *believe* these people," he said, cradling his bald head in his hands as the nose of the Hercules lifted off. "Do they think we *enjoy* coming to Somalia, that anyone *wants* to put up with that *shit* every day just to help them?"

I couldn't have agreed more. We were not exactly on a mission of mercy. But this violent episode was typical of many that I would come across during dozens of journeys to Somalia. Of course Abdi was an extreme example: so many Somalis I met were gracious and welcoming and friendly. I wanted to understand "these people"—these ancient nomadic warriors and peacemakers—who were thrown by default into a new era in which the measured cal-

culus of killing with a spear had been displaced by weapons of much greater efficiency. Intelligent in so many ways, Somalis were unprepared for the scale of chaos afflicting them. This dangerous cocktail was curiously both ancient and modern, and it mixed medieval demands for vengeance with today's disturbing ability to thoughtlessly kill vast numbers of people.

This disease had not been limited to Somalia. Several African states, the Balkans, Caucasus—even Indonesia—have been similarly driven to battle for ethnic or tribal differences. In Africa it has always been so, but has proved all the more potent when destructive firepower is easier to find than food and when government disappears or is complicit.

Somalia's collapse may always serve as grist for the attentions of those who explore the Dark Side of the human mind, who strive to measure "abnormal" behavior by locating pockets of inhumanity hidden in certain folds of the cerebellum of Somali marauders like Abdi, though they are common to all. Nevertheless, Somalia's recent history is also a tale of grave miscalculations made by foreigners in a very foreign land. Knowing nomads happily demonstrated their supremacy and disdain for the outsiders; the so-called "fruits" of civilization were not seen as such by them.

But it was the efficient modern methods of taking life—in such hard-worn and pitiless hands—that complicated the equation. Because Somalis are, like gunman Abdi, as hard as their country.

The reputation of Somalis as fearless defenders of their own independence, their reliant faith in Allah, their clans, and the regenerative glory of camels has evolved since Somalia provided fragrance to the ancient Egyptian pharaohs. The earliest references to the people of this parched wilderness are inevitably as 14th-century warriors, fighting bravely for Islam against the Christian "infidels" of Abyssinia. Taking part in the *jihad*, or holy war, they were "constantly praised for their bravery and daring and for their devotion to the cause of Islam."¹

But when not at the battlefield, Somalis were recorded as being "dangerous, savage brigands" accountable to no one but God, with a firm conviction that power came only from supremacy of force. The modern parallels are obvious, writes the historian Ioan Lewis. "Even under the Imam's banner, [Somali recruits] were often troublesome and difficult to manage. Frequently quarrels and struggles between Somali lineages took a similar course to that which they follow today."

To understand the roots of violence in Somalia requires knowing the uncompromising nature of the environment. The harsh life of nomads revolved solely around survival. Camels and water were important tools, but

so were good relations with other people and their clans. Kinship ties were paramount and were expected to be upheld in war and peace.

Every Somali child knows by heart his or her genealogy more than 20 generations, back to the revered common ancestral eponym of all Somalis, *Somaale*, from the words “go and milk.” Beyond this hero the line is traced presumptuously up to the Prophet Mohamed or to noble Arabian families.² From *Somaale*, the lineages divide into six clan families. Political allegiances are determined by the male line, so Somalis don’t ask each other *where* they are from but *whom* they are from.³ Everyone knows that their place on this intricate map determines their status, strength, and also the severity of revenge that would be carried out on their behalf.

Clan has always been the last refuge, the last security during crisis, the only proven guarantor of safety when the world falls apart. “The rains can fail, wells can dry up, pastures can turn to dust,” explains John Drysdale, a Briton who has fought alongside and lived among Somalis for decades. “It needs binding faith and clan loyalty to keep everyone alive.”⁴

The brutal climate also helped ensure that Somalis developed a code of conduct that—ideally—meant to protect the weak from the predations of the strong. So as idolized as powerful warriors might be, in poetry and folk tales, there were deterrents designed to limit the scope and destruction of hostilities.

Surprising as it sounds, in light of what has afflicted Somalia for the past decade, Somalis for centuries had developed peace making as an art form almost on par with war making. Some argue that these traditional restrictions could be considered a Somali version of the Geneva Conventions.

“Somali society traditionally offered men a choice of two ideally contrasting, and mutually necessary roles: that of warrior (*waranle*, literally ‘spear-bearer’) or man of God (*wadaad*),” writes Lewis. “It was the task of the latter not only to mediate between man and God, but also between men in the cause of peace and harmony.”⁵

But across this stark and beautiful land, there always have been too few resources, and therefore too many reasons to fight. From ownership of camels and women to pride and cultural praise for a man engaged in killing, desert rivals rarely saw eye to eye. Camels were—and still are—especially beloved, according to Somali oral history. The camel was described this way, by poet Omar Istreliya:

It is a living boulder placed by God in the wilderness;
Demel and her young ones are as vital to life as the tendons
of one’s back;
Had it not grown out of solid rock it should have not been
so highly appreciated.⁶

But it was the camel's ability to sustain life—just as relief aid would be during the civil war of the early 1990s—that made it worth fighting for. Exactly 100 camels was the blood money to be paid to atone for the killing of a Somali man—no other currency would do. In terms of camels, women were worth 50.

“Camels and horses constituted the only property whose looting in the time of war was sanctioned by Somali custom due to the high value attached to these animals by society,” say the oral historians. “Anyone who met his death while trying to loot camels . . . was considered to have died honorably in the course of a worthy undertaking.”

Still, this oral history speaks to the virtues of peace over war, and of harmony over discord. “War results in the death of a son, but not the birth of one,” explains one proverb. And another: “Men's ideal bedding is peace.”

The result of these sometimes conflicting views was that “although war was a constant feature . . . acts of excessive brutality were seldom committed.” The reasons were strictly a function of what it took to survive, as the Somali historians explain: “Since no group liked to be on the receiving end of such excessive violence, they took great care not to be the first to perpetrate it. They had every reason to believe that the example they set in victory would be the one followed by their opponents in the event of their own defeat.” This result “was dictated more than anything else by the pragmatic consideration of ensuring protection for one's own vulnerabilities in the swinging fortunes of war.”

Such careful calculations may have worked when raiding parties faced their enemies with spears. And making peace even then was a delicate undertaking that required mediators, long talk, and mutual respect. But this careful balance toward peace—achieved in the past despite even the most atrocious transgressions—has broken down during the modern age of the gun, as the old divisions between who was weak and who was strong disappeared.

After all, killing with a spear requires far more commitment to the act than simply pulling a trigger.

Hand in hand with this warring history, of course, was pride in total personal, and later national, independence. “Few writers have failed to notice the formidable pride of the Somali nomad, his extraordinary sense of superiority as an individual, and his firm conviction that he is the sole master of his actions and subject to no authority except that of God,” Lewis notes.⁷ This legacy bedeviled every would-be colonizer. Somalis fought rule by the Italians in the late 19th century, then against British forces that tried to impose law, order, and administration.

The crucial lesson for those considering intervention in Somalia was embodied in the case of Sheikh Mohamed Abdullah Hassan, dubbed the

“Mad Mullah” by the British.⁸ Warriors united under the sheikh for more than 20 years at the turn of the century, defeating every force sent against them. The Mad Mullah issued white turbans and strings of Muslim prayer beads to the “Dervishes,” as his 5,000 mustered loyalists were called. In the course of his military crusade he declared a “holy war” against the Christian infidels, and his nationalist example—along with a particular mastery of evocative poetry and song that inspired his fighters to extraordinary bravery—is often invoked today.

What isn’t remembered so well but parallels the modern era of clan warfare is that battles between the Dervishes, their Somali rivals, and the British caused mass starvation. Somalis were reduced to eating rats, and by the end of 1912, officials believed that a third of the entire population had perished in what came to be called the “Time of Eating Filth.”

After suffering heavy casualties in numerous ground campaigns—which included use of a mounted camel constabulary—the British finally put down the Mad Mullah in 1920 with Royal Air Force bombers, in a carefully planned land and sea assault. Even then victory over the rebellious Somalis was slight. The British only lightly imposed themselves thereafter by keeping fewer than 200 officials in the protectorate. “It is wonderful,” remarked one British officer, “how little we have yet managed to impress the Somalis with our superior firepower.”⁹

Their subsequent respect for Somali intransigence was made clear in a report on tribes in British Somaliland published by the military government in 1945. The “savage and despotic” Mad Mullah was praised for “exact[ing] unquestioning obedience founded on fear” during his reign, though he forced British officers to pull back to just two coastal towns. The risks of less-than-iron rule were made plain: “With the withdrawal of British control of the interior, indescribable disorder and inter-tribal warfare broke out, and in the holocaust which followed it is estimated perhaps one-third of the male population of British Somaliland were speared to death.”¹⁰

Unappealing as it sounded, Somalia had attracted me for a long time. When rebels were pushing at the gates of Mogadishu in December 1990, on the eve of the Gulf War, I was based in Cyprus for *The Sunday Telegraph* (London). I sent messages to check the interest but, predictably, there was none. When I moved to Africa the next summer, Somalia was at the top of my list.

Before my first trip in September 1991, foreigners who had spent any time in Somalia issued dire warnings. Civil war between these mysterious clans and its attendant anarchy were well under way, and I should beware. Every Somali was a born killer, I was told, and this instinct would be unleashed at the slightest insult. Except for paying gunmen “guards” with cash—which

was dangerous enough—I should know that all Somalis were larcenous and that fiscal disputes could be as bloody as those about injured pride.

I was never told of Somalis' unflinching generosity toward friends and sometimes toward enemies. How many times would I be invited into someone's house for a feast beyond their means? But these warnings were also based on bad experience. Somalia's neighbors have always referred with disdain to this barren land as the home of the *shifta*, or bandit. Somalis have done little to dispel the stereotype, and refer to their own bandits as *moryan*, with a mixture of fear and respect.

Somalis constituted the most extensive and united "nation" in Africa before the arrival of European adventurers. Speaking the same language and adherents of the same Sunna Muslim faith, they should have been among the last to dissolve into internecine conflict. Among themselves they are divided only by clan, by relationships between extended families that stretch back over generations. The Somalis were deprived of their natural ethnic homogeneity before the turn of the century, however, when their "nation" was one of many victims of the whimsical carve-up of Africa by colonial powers at the Berlin Conference of 1884–85.

With these divisions imposed from abroad, the dismemberment of Greater Somalia would serve the ambitions of future leaders by providing a ready-made reason to war against neighbors. Differences among clans would in turn serve as reason to war against each other.

Spread already across the Horn of Africa, ethnic Somalis were split five ways. The border with Ethiopia lopped off much of the Ogaden and Haud deserts to the west; tiny Djibouti was excluded in the northwest and given to France; and the border with Kenya divided southern "Somalia." Aspirations of one day unifying Greater Somalia, of "liberating" those Somalis forced to live under foreign banners, were evident in the national flag unfurled at independence in 1960: five points of a white star, set on a blue background.

The dream of Greater Somalia was resurrected by Mohamed Siad Barre, the dictator who came to power in a military coup in 1969. He hid the mystery of his iron-fisted rule behind dark glasses. Protruding features bunched together below Barre's hairless nostrils. A tiny square Hitlerian mustache adorned lips that gaped like those of a foraging bottom fish. This look prompted a derisive nickname among irreverent Somalis: Big Mouth. Ruthless in every way, Barre maintained his stranglehold by tight control of the army and security services and—though attacking the cancer of tribalism in public—by quietly playing clans off one another. Possibly nothing less could have kept Somalis at relative peace under a central authority. The dictator himself anticipated the coming chaos. "Tribalism and nationalism cannot go hand in hand," he declared. "It is unfortunate that our nation is rather too

clannish; if all Somalis are to go to Hell, tribalism will be their vehicle to reach there.”¹¹

In the 1970s and early 1980s, Barre’s ideology of “Scientific Socialism” officially aimed to destroy the ancient clan system. Launching a national campaign, Barre held formal ceremonies to symbolically “bury” the grip of clans, often burning effigies representing tribalism and misrule.¹² Kinship greetings were completely outlawed, including terms referring to “former” clan status that were used to get around that rule. But no matter the whims of their leaders: ties of blood kinship were too embedded in the Somali psyche to be exorcised.

This abiding faith in clan, coupled with the modern weapons amassed by Barre during the Cold War, would lead to disaster. Unimportant as Somalia’s natural resources are to the outside world—limitless sand and a few drops of low-grade oil—the country sits at a strategic gateway to the Middle East and Red Sea route to the Mediterranean Sea and Europe. Banking on this strategic fact, Barre was all too happy to ensure that Somalia figured in the Cold War calculations of the superpowers, first of the Soviets and later of the Americans. In 1974 Somalia was the first sub-Saharan African country to sign a friendship treaty with the Soviet Union, and the 6,000 Soviet soldiers and civilians there ran the place as though they were operating out of a “mini-Kremlin,” according to one account. “They controlled the ministries of defense and information, the secret police and an important military facility at Berbera. They turned the ragtag Somali army into a 25,000-man fighting force, armed with heavy artillery and AK-47 assault rifles. They supplied the air force with MiG fighters, and the schools with teachers who taught more political theory than mathematics.”¹³

The superpower rivalry was waged there at fever pitch. The US in the early 1970s was allied to Ethiopia—that historical scourge of Somalia, because of the “persecuted” ethnic Somalis in the Ogaden and Haud. American Peace Corps volunteers were stoned in the streets of Mogadishu, and by 1971 they were forced to withdraw. US diplomats were spat upon, and by 1977 the embassy staff was pared down to three. Mogadishu was plastered with posters that showed Somali peasants stomping on Uncle Sam. The value of Soviet weaponry alone infused into Somalia totaled \$270 million.¹⁴

But in 1977, buoyed by this military hardware—and, no doubt, notions of natural superiority—the Somali army itself marched into the Ogaden. Ethiopian units fell back, and within two months 90 percent of the Ogaden was in Somali hands: the dream of Greater Somalia was partly realized.

The Soviets, however, had already begun to support the young Ethiopian revolutionaries who had deposed Emperor Haile Salassie. Their efforts to persuade Barre to form a Marxist alliance with Ethiopia failed, and the Somali

leader forced the Soviets to make a choice. Tired of Barre's irascibility, the Soviets switched allegiances, prompting a remarkable Cold War flip-flop in the Horn of Africa. Overnight Soviet advisers moved from Mogadishu to Addis Ababa, and within months 15,000 Cuban troops, columns of Soviet tanks, and hardware—worth \$1 billion—were deployed to “protect” Ethiopia's borders. In Somalia, the hitherto sacred trinity of Marx, Lenin, and Barre was never mentioned again.

As they had thrilled at fighting for centuries, Somalis were obsessed with the war. Health clinics were converted to make uniforms, and the demand for news of the front was so great that neither radios nor batteries could be found in the markets.¹⁵ The Soviet realignment belatedly caused an American turn-around, as Barre played the Cold War card to find a new source for weapons. He begged Western and Arab countries for help to turn back Soviet-Cuban “imperialism” in Africa's Horn. President Jimmy Carter promised military aid but Congress insisted that Somalia first withdraw its troops from the Ogaden. The imperious leader, Big Mouth, had miscalculated.

Backed by overwhelming Soviet and Cuban firepower, Ethiopia began to recapture the Ogaden, despite Barre's personal direction of the final stages of the war. National pride was dealt a severe blow—a bad result for any Somali warrior, for whom victory alone assures power and credibility. Barre purged the top ranks of the military. But defeat was so total that Barre feared Ethiopian units would cross into Somalia. Arms were anxiously distributed to civilians and refugees in the north. Those weapons in angry public hands would haunt Barre until his fall.

For a decade from 1978, even as Barre hardened repressive measures, the US spilled \$800 million into the country, one-quarter for military “aid,” in exchange for its own military access to ports and airports. Somalia's former colonial master, Italy, contributed \$1 billion from 1981 to 1990, more than half of which went for weapons.¹⁶ The value of foreign aid to Somalia soared to \$80 per person, the highest rate in Africa and equivalent to half the gross domestic product.¹⁷

The now limitless supply of mortars, 106mm anti-tank cannons, and howitzers, along with the aging Soviet hardware, would serve to lubricate the nation's destruction. Since the Mad Mullah, there had hardly been a time when Somalia was not at war with itself or its neighbors. But with internal opposition growing, armed insurgency was inevitable.

As his unpopularity grew, and despite his lip service to ending clanism, President Barre systematically replaced top officials with his own clansmen. By 1987, half the senior officer corps in the army were Marehan or related clans.¹⁸ Armed opposition groups emerged based on clan affiliation, and insurrection erupted in the north.