



# KNOWLEDGE WILL NOT SAVE US

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I FIRST MET PETER GADET in the back room of an empty bar in an empty hotel in Addis Ababa. He sat at the head of a long table, as if about to chair a company meeting, though the hotel, with its lurid purple walls, felt more like the set of a bad horror film than the headquarters of a busy corporation. His affable private secretary, Denay Chagor, translated Gadet's gruff Nuer—the language of South Sudan's second largest ethnic group—into English. “The world,” Gadet said, “has not forgotten about Peter Gadet.” I wasn't sure if this was a question or a statement.

It was June 2015, South Sudan's civil war was in full flow, and Gadet was a general in the principal rebel group in the country, the Sudan People's Liberation Army in Opposition (SPLA-IO). Two years earlier, South Sudan's President, Salva Kiir, had dismissed his Nuer vice president, Riek Machar, along with the rest of his cabinet. Kiir then centralized power around a clique of loyalists who built up a series of militias recruited from among the Dinka, the president's ethnic group. Six months later, in December 2013, after a contested meeting of South Sudan's ruling party, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), clashes broke out between Kiir and Machar's bodyguards. This gave the government the excuse it needed to send its militia forces into the streets of Juba, the state capital, where they went door-to-door killing Nuer civilians in a deliberate campaign to polarize the nation along ethnic lines. It worked.

Gadet told me that when he first got word of the killings in Juba, he was in Bor, serving as the commander of a division of the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), South Sudan's army. Government forces had killed seven of his sons. “I had to do something,” he said, “or we would

all die, all Nuer.” He led his division of the SPLA into revolt, and it became the nucleus of the SPLA-IO. In reaction to the killings in Juba, the entire country split into two: on one side, Kiir, his militias, and the weight of the South Sudanese state; on the other, Gadet and the largely Nuer SPLA-IO, under the command of Machar.

For six months, fighting centered on the Greater Upper Nile region as the two sides contested control of its major cities. Each time the cities changed hands, more and more buildings were razed and there was less and less to win. By mid-2014, the cities’ former residents were huddled in UN bases, staring out at the ruins of their homes. Still, Gadet was hopeful. Only the intervention of the Ugandan army, he explained, had saved the government and prevented the SPLA-IO from marching on Juba. Others were less enthusiastic about Gadet’s prospects. The European Union imposed sanctions, including a travel ban, claiming in its official journal that he was responsible for “fueling the cycle of violence . . . and for serious human rights violations.”

“How have these sanctions affected you?” I asked. Gadet looked at me, his eyes twinkling. “They have made Gathoth Gatkuoth extremely jealous,” he whispered, naming another rebel general. He gestured out of the room to the bar and its floor-to-ceiling windows, from which you could see all of downtown Addis.

Gadet’s dreams didn’t last long. By 2015, government forces had retaken all the major urban centers, and recriminations were underway. The politicians around Machar criticized the generals for failing to rally the Nuer of Unity State, Gadet’s home area. The problem, Gadet told me, was the politicians. He blamed Machar for failing to secure matériel for his forces. His anger was palpable, and it came as little surprise when only two weeks after we met, he and several other generals in the SPLA-IO were dismissed by Machar, as the South Sudanese opposition fragmented.

After a couple of hours, Gadet became tired. He didn’t look well. His eyes still shone, but he seemed withdrawn, a faded print of the photographs I had seen of this famous warrior. I thanked him and went to leave. Don’t forget Gadet, he said as I exited the room. I told him that was unlikely.

On my way out, Denay, the private secretary and translator, pulled me aside for a chat. His family had fled the second Sudanese civil war into Ethiopia, and he had ended up in America. There he played

basketball and graduated with a master's degree from the University of Wisconsin–Madison. He came back, he said, to save his country, but he found corruption everywhere. Machar was just as bad as Kiir. He was hoping that America would help. Gadet would be a good president. Could I put him in touch with the State Department?

I looked back at Gadet, slumped in his chair, a veteran of too many wars and too many crimes to be palatable to DC. What America would like, I thought, is someone like Denay: English-speaking, charismatic—an acceptable face for ethnic politics in an age of endless war. I told him I would see what I could do.

**T**HE SHEER VARIETY of groups in southern Sudan—from pastoralists to royal kingdoms—makes it a graveyard for generalities. The most common story told about the area refers to its impenetrable swamps and incomprehensible languages. It's a place, or so the cliché goes, beyond the pale of history, untouched by the market. The truth is quite the contrary. If anything unites the disparate groups of southern Sudan, it's their violent inclusion in global politics. Since the beginning of the 19th century, the area has experienced a series of intrusions by external powers. Slavers from Khartoum, Sudan's capital, were followed by a Turco-Egyptian occupation, and then, beginning in 1898, a British colonial administration that lasted until Sudanese independence in 1956. Each of these regimes used southern Sudan as a periphery from which resources could be extracted, and pitted southern populations against each other as a means of doing so.

The first civil war got started before independence arrived. The Sudanese political elite saw the south much as previous regimes had seen it: a periphery to be exploited. Southern politicians were not going to be included in the post-independence political order, and they knew it. In 1955, an army mutiny quickly spread around southern Sudan and led to a seventeen-year-long civil war, as rebel forces splintered and formed new factions. The Sixties were the era of the Azania Liberation Front and the Suez River Republic, each fighting their own liberation struggle, united only in their opposition to the northern Sudanese state.

The first civil war came to an end in 1972, following a revolution in Sudan and the coronation of a socialist-military elite in Khartoum that sought an alliance with the southern peripheries against the merchant class it had deposed. There followed a ten-year period in which, for the

first time in the region's history, Khartoum tried to develop southern Sudan. Jafaar Nimeiri, Sudan's president, imagined the south as an agricultural zone that could export to the Middle East. In retrospect, those ten years were the high point of Sudanese nationalism. When the global financial crises of the 1970s hit Khartoum, Sudan's debt burden became insurmountable, and the government withdrew from the south, leaving hollow promises of development behind. South Sudan's landscape is full of the relics of this era: ruined government buildings ruling over indifferent cows that graze in a landscape once destined to become a breadbasket for the region. As the hopes of the 1970s receded, revolt was once more in the air.

The SPLM, today the ruling party of South Sudan, was formed in the 1980s and wanted to avoid the errors of previous rebels. In the 1970s the Sudanese government had bought the loyalty of an opposition force called "Anyanya I" by rewarding its soldiers with jobs and salaries. In an early SPLM manifesto, the movement's leader, John Garang, criticized these older rebels as "jobbists," content with receiving a wage from the oppressor and taking their part of a deeply unequal pie. The point was not to eat your fill, Garang contended, but to bake something new.

Under Garang's charismatic leadership, the SPLM's supporters included people not just from the south but also from peripheral areas elsewhere in Sudan. The goal was national revolution, a continuation of the socialist dream of the '70s. Concretely, the movement failed. For all its talk of rural development, the SPLM modeled itself on the Sudanese army. It didn't create structures of government, but acted, as the southern intellectual Peter Adwok Nyaba has it in *The Politics of Liberation in South Sudan*, "like an agent of occupation in the areas it controlled." Rather than jobbists, the SPLM became looters.

While the SPLM organized itself along the lines of the Sudanese army, Khartoum was busy splintering southern opposition forces, setting the Dinka and the Nuer against each other. Though in theory the second Sudanese civil war (1983–2005) was between Khartoum and the SPLM, most of the fighting actually took place between southern groups, as the Sudanese government sponsored Nuer militia forces to depopulate the areas around newly discovered oil reserves, opening them up for foreign companies to exploit.

One of the most promising Nuer commanders was Peter Gadet. After joining the Sudanese army, he was dispatched to Baghdad as

part of a Pan-Arab force that would fight in the Iran–Iraq war. On his return to Sudan, in 1986, he went back to Unity State and carved out a reputation as a fearsome commander with wandering loyalties: he fought for the SPLA, the Sudanese army, and in Nuer militias, leveraging his military prowess as if he were a Wall Street investment bank. I once asked an aging SPLA commander about Gadet. “Ah, Gadet,” he exclaimed, and then leaned over and whispered, “he is like a butterfly. He moves from branch to branch, but always higher, for a better rank.”

The second civil war saw dizzying splits within the belligerent parties. These divisions, however, tended to obscure the conflict’s organizing logic. No matter which side a commander was on, he would carve out a territory under his control. The leaders of the Nuer militias protecting the oil fields in Unity State used guns from Khartoum to steal cattle and food from the surrounding territories, in what was in effect a wealth transfer from an immiserated civilian population to an emergent military class. Peter Gadet became extremely wealthy during this period, though he was always cagey about just how rich he had become. “How many cows,” I once asked him, “do you really have?” His eyes twinkled again. “Only one,” he said. “A very large one.”

The story was similar in areas under SPLM control. Military commanders became dictators over vast swathes of the country. Not only did the SPLM loot from civilians, it also acquired and redistributed aid resources from NGOs. To be a successful commander during the war meant controlling external resources—guns from Addis or Khartoum and aid from America or Norway—and redistributing them to buy loyalty from armed networks organized through kin and ethnicity. If you didn’t pay, your troops would look elsewhere for leadership. The civil war heralded the emergence of this rich class of commanders.

While Garang began the SPLM with dreams of taking power in Khartoum and transforming Sudan, his organization had always been divided between his own supporters and those who favored an independent south. At the turn of the century, with military victory as far away as ever, it was the pro-independence lobby that became dominant.

In the early 2000s, under pressure from an American government that was increasingly interested in Khartoum’s role in supporting Al Qaeda in the ’90s, and which saw backing southern secession as an easy foreign policy success, Sudan reluctantly entered into negotiations with the SPLM. The result, signed in 2005, was the Comprehensive Peace

Agreement (CPA). This document guaranteed southern regional government for six years and then a referendum on secession. America thought of this as its achievement—a saving grace amid the disasters of the Middle East. On the walls of the cubicles at the US State Department, certificates began to appear celebrating the roles foreign policy workers had played in the creation of South Sudan; such achievements are the stuff of which careers are made. In meeting after meeting in Juba in the 2000s, I heard foreign diplomats talking of the new country as if it were a child, ushered into the age of maturity by America's benevolent hands. The SPLM had fought for twenty-two years.

**W**HEN THE REFERENDUM finally occurred, in January 2011, the result was a foregone conclusion. Monitors dutifully watched 98.3 percent of southern Sudan vote to become the world's newest nation. In the prior five years, known as the CPA period (2005–11), Khartoum had made a half-hearted effort to woo the south with development projects. When it became clear that the south would secede, the projects were abruptly halted, leaving newly abandoned buildings and roads to nowhere next to the aborted dreams of the 1970s.

The CPA period was a bonanza for the SPLM, which had become the official ruling party of southern Sudan. Oil pipelines shut off by the conflict came back online and money flowed. International donors moved in, eager to take part in South Sudan's birth. The financial transformation was dizzying. In 2005, southern Sudan had no working institutions and barely any paved roads. By 2008, the first year for which the World Bank made an estimate of the size of the southern Sudanese economy, it was valued at \$15 billion, more than neighboring Uganda. Suddenly the military leaders who had built themselves up through foreign aid and local pillage during the second civil war had new sources of wealth. It was this military class that took control of the state.

Billions of dollars disappeared into the pockets of officials. Government contracts were single-sourced, and payments—invariably to companies connected to politicians—were sometimes at ten times the market price. South Sudan is full of stories of corruption: \$2 billion earmarked for grain that went missing; briefcases full of cash heaved onto the daily flight to Nairobi; politicians purchasing expensive mansions in some of the Kenyan capital's most exclusive neighborhoods.

It's easy to write the history of this period as a racist moral fable about corrupt African politicians not yet ready for the sober demands of the liberal democratic order. Perhaps, some exasperated State Department officers suggested, a UN trusteeship is in order? What this just-so story ignores is that the donors who had poured into Juba turned a blind eye to the reality of South Sudanese politics. Corruption is the cost of building a new nation, diplomats and development workers alike told me. Not only did the international community acquiesce to the corruption, they also—via nice salaries, hardship allowances, and kickbacks—got very rich themselves.

Some of the purloined money went into foreign bank accounts, but most of it flowed into the same political economy that had functioned during the second civil war. In 2005, all of the Nuer militias guarding the oil fields remained unintegrated into the SPLA, South Sudan's official army, and the SPLM feared that Khartoum would once again sponsor these forces and disrupt the referendum. John Garang died in a helicopter crash that year, and his place was taken by Salva Kiir, a Dinka military leader with none of Garang's charisma. Kiir decided to buy off the militias with oil money. From 2005 to 2008, the army increased in size from forty thousand to two hundred thousand men, though many of those were ghost soldiers invented by commanders keen to profit from the salaries of specters. The jobbists returned, in greater numbers than ever.

None of the militia forces had any loyalty to Juba that extended beyond the next payoff. On the ground, commanders retained their own personal fiefdoms and used the threat of violence to leverage further payouts from the capital. The master of this art was Peter Gadet, who frequently rebelled, only to be reabsorbed into the army, a butterfly ascending the branches. Everyone was looking for their piece of the pie, the internationals as much as the South Sudanese. The corruption of the CPA period was less a moral failing than simply the cost of doing business. If you wanted to play the game of politics, you had to pay.

**O**N JULY 9, 2011, when celebrities arrived in Juba to join the carnival celebrating South Sudan's secession, no one wanted to talk about any of this. The whole period was saturated in platitudes. The world's newest nation. Now the real work starts. Et cetera. Those were heady days in Juba.

South Sudanese enthusiasm for their new state was paralleled only by that of the development industry. While the people may have voted for a new nation, now a new state was to be created, and for that experts were required. Young, ambitious experts. They came by the thousands: an invading white army of development-industry apparatchiks armed with PowerPoints. Bureaucracies needed to be created. There were to be endless workshops. (The development industry can solve any problem, as long as the answer is a workshop.) An English organization had the unfortunate task of bringing order to the Ministry of Finance and Planning, and I frequently met one of its representatives at the Juba airport; each time he looked thinner and whiter than before, haunted by the missing millions, as the South Sudanese ran rings around him. I felt like cheering.

“As a new nation without formal institutions, rules, or administration accepted as legitimate by society, South Sudan must build its institutions from scratch,” one World Bank report argued. Kiir, Garang’s replacement, was only too happy to play along. Shortly after independence, he gave a speech that could have been written by the World Bank: “While we may continue to encounter difficulties on a routine basis, we will take advantage of beginning from scratch. The Republic of South Sudan is like a white paper. *Tabula rasa*.”

This is precisely how the international community saw South Sudan—as *terra nullius* to be occupied by their dreams. It was a useful story for all concerned. For the international community, the assumption that South Sudan was a *tabula rasa* relieved it of any obligation to learn about the region’s history. For the South Sudanese political elite, the international community’s approach allowed them to hide the continuities between the second civil war and the CPA period.

I came to Juba in 2010, to do fieldwork for a PhD in anthropology, and living in the capital, one could—if only for a moment—almost believe the fantasy of the international community. Juba would be the physical instantiation of the dreamworld: the stage set that made the actors’ lines believable, replete with swimming pools, hotels, paved roads, and, after a few years, South Sudan’s first elevator. The development set gleefully announced that their lives in the capital took place within the “Juba bubble.” What happened in the rest of the country felt totally disconnected. The peripheries were the past; the capital was the future. It was a driver taking you to the office on Monday. A Skype call

with the donors in New York on Thursday. A party at the International Committee for the Red Cross compound on Friday. The country outside Juba consisted of “field trips” that lasted two days and stories of adversity that lasted weeks.

Outside Juba the country wasn’t doing so well. Commanders like Gadet were rebelling in the peripheries. In Jonglei State, the level of violence was worse than it had been during much of the second civil war. For the development set, such atavistic violence only confirmed their sense of purpose: that was what development would overcome. To read the triumphalist press statements of the international community, a national army was being forged in South Sudan and a nation-state built. In reality, the army remained fractured, and what appeared to be state-building was a continuation of the politics of the second civil war: the enrichment of a military class on the back of an immiserated citizenry. When I tried talking to those in the Juba bubble about these issues, I was met with shrugs. There were donor funds to spend. Anyway, military matters were in the capable hands of the United Nations.

The UN Mission in Sudan (UNMIS) was created after the signing of the CPA, and lasted until South Sudanese independence, at which point it added an S and an official mandate of state-building. It was one of the biggest, most expensive peacekeeping operations in the world, with ten thousand military personnel, thousands of civilian officers, and a budget of over \$1 billion a year.

Most importantly, the UN mission came with fleets of helicopters and planes. I was suspicious of the Juba bubble and anxious to get out and do fieldwork. Maybe, I thought, the UN would help.

**D**OING RESEARCH in South Sudan isn’t easy. If you want to travel around the country, you have to go by plane, and the international community controls the transport infrastructure. This is one of the reasons that journalists and researchers are so reluctant to criticize the UN. If you are blacklisted, you lose your ticket.

Air travel isn’t the only problem. Let’s say that you have a friendly UN staffer who puts you on a plane to Bentiu, the capital of Unity State. Now you’ve arrived and have to get around. Car rental in Bentiu can cost \$500 a day, and outside state capitals you can forget about hotels. Every researcher I know finds themselves working with NGOs that fund their investigations. My fieldwork grant ran out quickly, and like everyone

else I looked for work with an international organization. I was suspicious, but all my findings would be public, I told myself. I would say exactly what I wanted, and if doing such work enabled me to get out of Juba, it must be worth it. Soon enough, a Swiss organization hired me to write a report on the Sudan–South Sudan border just after independence. All along the frontier, clashes were intensifying. My job was to work out what was going on.

That’s how I found myself in the middle of Unity State, in June 2012, at the height of South Sudan’s rainy season, my vehicle stuck in the mud on a rough dirt road between Bentiu and Yida, a refugee camp on the border. In the stark afternoon light, the road looked like a photograph of a busy rural thoroughfare. There were around twenty vehicles marooned on a one-mile stretch of mud, just wide enough for two trucks to squeeze past each other. One of the trucks belonged to the World Food Programme (WFP), and it was surrounded by discarded branches, indications of many failed attempts to release the vehicle from the heavy red clay soil. The truck’s driver and his companion sat next to it, staring disconsolately at the quail flitting through the bush. They had got stuck two weeks ago and couldn’t pry the heavy vehicle free. Leaving it behind was not an option. The bureaucrats in Juba feared that the ten metric tons of food aid it contained, needed in Yida, would be stolen by soldiers. “So, we have to wait,” they said, “and stand guard.” I failed to see what they could do against a group of armed men. Was Juba sending assistance? Could I help them get their truck out of the mud? They shook their heads. “The truck is too heavy for you to tow, and Juba isn’t sending anyone. We were told to wait. We sleep in the car and listen to the rain.” What, I asked, were they waiting for? “For the dry season,” they said. “Then the road will harden and the mud turn to dust. It won’t be long now.”

In Juba, life is lived according to plans. Timetables work in the office. Doing fieldwork, nothing ever works. There is no phone signal. Trucks break down. I was impatient and didn’t want to wait for October and the dry season to leave—I had a report to research. Another truck driver told me that Chol, proud possessor of the area’s only tractor, would tow my vehicle for a fee. I could see Chol up ahead and I ran over, insisting that my Toyota 4×4 be next in line. He looked skeptical. Most of the marooned vehicles belonged to the army, and it had priority.

Defeated, I slumped under an SPLA truck, seeking shelter from the harsh sun. The soldiers greeted me and I noticed the neat piles of plastic

blue-and-white wrappers surrounding them, each showing the shiny face of a white baby that I recognized as the icon of the fortified glucose biscuits that the WFP intended for the refugees in Yida. The soldiers smiled. "At least we won't go hungry," I said.

This was a life far removed from the dreamworld of Juba. The local county commissioner, I was told, was the same man who had ruled the area during the second civil war, except now he taxed NGOs and got payoffs from Juba. These young men had never seen the benefits of the oil economy, even though the fields were but a twenty-minute drive from where we were stuck. I asked if things had changed since South Sudanese independence. They nodded. The governor of Unity State, Taban Deng Gai, had taken their land. "And what about Gadet?" I asked. They laughed. Gadet is Gadet.

I NEVER GOT MY CAR out of the mud. The rest of my trip consisted of walking for hours down the road, in torrential rain, before snatching an interview with the commander of the area. Then I marched back to a small refugee camp south of my abandoned vehicle, and begged a ride back to Bentiu from Save the Children. Eventually, I returned to Juba and presented my work to the UN officers who had facilitated my trip. I didn't feel too bad about this quid pro quo. Yes, I had internalized graduate school suspicion of the UN. But I was only saying what I thought, and I was critical of the international community's role in facilitating the predatory behavior of the clique controlling the South Sudanese state. After my lecture, one UN staffer, astonished by my knowledge of the kinship networks of the Nuer leadership in Unity, asked me uncertainly: What is fieldwork, exactly? It's just talking to people, I said. You should try it.

I might have been exasperated by the ignorance I found in the UN mission, but I was gratified by its interest, which made such a contrast to the indifference of the development set. Maybe this was where anthropology could make a difference. The international community didn't just misunderstand the country—in many cases, it was enabling the schemes of the elite. War commanders, enthroned as county commissioners, directed NGOs to build clinics and provide services in areas under their control, at the cost of minority populations elsewhere, exacerbating ethnic divisions. You are all, I would say in my presentations, a part of this mess.

Those most interested in my knowledge of South Sudanese politics were the UN's civilian staff. Over the course of my research in the 2010s I became an informal part of the team, regularly consulted by a changing cast of conflict analysts as they rotated in and out of the country. Even when I went back to America for a break, I would get calls asking me for information about what was happening in Unity. That UN analysts in Juba would need to phone someone in Oakland to get news about events happening in South Sudan requires some explanation.

The structure of the UN mission makes it almost impossible for analysts to find out anything for themselves. I have friends for whom the hardened perimeter walls of the base in Juba represent the limits of the knowable world. Inside, life proceeds according to implementation matrices, and days are spent traversing the ornate bureaucracy of the mission. Organizing leave (permitted once every six weeks for "hardship" assignments) is an odyssey, requiring expert navigation through a sea of paperwork.

In the small amount of time remaining to them, analysts are supposed to learn something about South Sudan. That's no easy feat. If an analyst is at the UN base in Bentiu, for instance, they *could* travel to Mayom, in the west of Unity State, but that would require approval from risk-averse security teams as well as a military escort—plus yet more forms. Sometimes, UN helicopters would carry an analyst into the field, only for them to spend twenty minutes on the ground, explaining who they are and what they are doing, before the helicopter would be due to take off again. Those helicopters do not wait around. For UN analysts, contact with actual South Sudanese people not employed by the mission tends to be fleeting and superficial. Their attempts to understand the country largely consist in trying to decode patrol reports written up by peacekeepers.

UN troops mainly come from the global south. For many of these soldiers, South Sudan is their first trip abroad, and it's not one to be missed. A tour with the UN means receiving triple your salary back home; it's a retirement package for an Indian infantryman. Peacekeepers arrive in Juba ready to build homes in Gujarat, on India's western coast, rather than risk their lives in a country they know nothing about. Their patrol reports are often copied and pasted from older versions. For troops collecting a paycheck and waiting to go home, one incident of violence is much like another. During the current civil war, after a

government militia attacked a village, raping many women and killing many of the men, the UN patrol wrote up the event as: “reported incidents of SGBV [sexual and gender-based violence] by UAG [unidentified armed group].” It’s easier not to know.

I don’t blame the peacekeepers. The problem is structural. For HQ in New York, UNMISS is one of the most expensive peacekeeping missions of all time. It’s in the UN’s interest that it succeeds even if success means overlooking failures, such as the mission’s total inability to protect civilians during the current conflict, in which at least four hundred thousand people have died, often at the hands of government forces. For the head of UNMISS, it’s more important that the mission doesn’t clash with the government, and that’s why it stays silent when UN personnel are beaten and tries its level best not to ask the wrong questions.

Don’t make too many inquiries. Make sure your forms are filled out correctly. These are the golden rules of UNMISS. That’s why peacekeepers’ patrol reports tell you nothing about the situation on the ground. That’s why a Nuer child, found randomly on the streets of Bentiu, could tell you more about the kinship networks of Nuer politicians than most UN analysts.

Here, I thought, was a job for an academic. To know as much as a small Nuer child. In her work, Séverine Autesserre, the French political scientist, claims that to make a heteroglot organization like the UN function requires severing it from the world in which it acts. That’s how you build team-UN. The sense of unity that links together Canadian conflict analysts and Rwandan helicopter pilots is constituted much like the *esprit de corps* at a summer camp: keep them together, put up a barrier to the outside, and watch the romances develop. Sure, she concedes, that can lead to a lack of knowledge about the places where the organization operates. But that’s where academics come in. People like anthropologists can provide the UN with context-specific knowledge, and then everything will work better. Academics like this story. Knowledge *can* save us.

IN OCTOBER 2012, three months after I was stuck on the road to Yida, I was standing in the security line outside the State Department, ready to talk to some of the diplomats who considered themselves the fathers of East Africa’s beleaguered new nation. The Swiss organization I worked for was funded by the American government and part of the

job was briefings like these. I went with reluctance. For most anthropologists, wary after the discipline's long and fraught history of collaboration with colonial powers and the CIA, the American government is the enemy. Still, I told myself, I wasn't going to inform on anyone. My role was to tell the State Department that the South Sudanese state was a fiction weaved by the military class and the international community that would soon come to an end. I thought that knowledge might make a difference. If I didn't think that, why was I practicing anthropology?

I had never been to the State Department, and people with experience of such things told me that I should definitely not be myself. Don't be academic, they said, and for fuck's sake, Joshua, no Lacan. I had prepared a pithy, funny talk, full of things they needed to know. It was a cold October day in DC, dry season in South Sudan, and life in the new state was imploding. Fighting was occurring throughout the country. The aid industry was complicit in the conflict. I had actionable items. The presentation was going to be under twenty minutes long. For the first time in a decade, I was even wearing a suit.

Standing in line that morning, my companions didn't seem to notice my unease. Colleague 1 was an American arms expert, ready to sell the State Department the vital services of his organization. Colleague 2 was an Italian specialist in tracking small arms who was dressed in an eggshell-blue suit that would have made me look like an out-of-work pimp, but that he wore with aplomb. Over it, he had draped a long white scarf. "Last time I was in DC," he said, "I told the diplomats that I had just been with the rebels, and was wearing this scarf. They looked like they wanted to eat me. They love feeling close to reality. After so many hours cooped up in offices, trying to bend the world to their projections, they end up dreaming about it." He smiled. "They're going to love you," he said. "Remember, they don't call it the State Department. It's just State. As if there were only one."

Inside, we sat at a narrow table in the office of the Special Envoy for South Sudan. As I was preparing to speak, I was interrupted by a young man, alive with his own question's urgency: "Is South Sudan the next Syria?"

Part of me wanted to refuse the question. I'm an anthropologist. South Sudan is South Sudan. It's a place with its own particular history. Syria is Syria. That's not how State works. Over the years, I've heard different versions of the young man's question. If we intervene, is South

Sudan likely to be Kosovo or Iraq? How worried should we be about the Islamists in Sudan? Is Sudan likely to be Mali? (Remember that for State, Mali is Afghanistan.) This is the story of State, where no one has time for anything, places do not have histories, and a form of analogical reasoning has developed in which countries are simply situations for intervention. Iraq isn't Iraq, even analogically—it's what *we* did to *them*. It's only through this sort of abstraction that one can begin to think that the US intervention in Kosovo was a success against which future imperial adventures can be measured.

I played along with his game and offered a prediction. Then I got on with my talk. The diplomats looked interested. Some of them even made notes. They seemed like they wanted to know things about South Sudan. But that knowledge, it couldn't be clearer, was distinct from the analogic frameworks they actually used to make decisions.

Afterward, over a whiskey, Colleague 1 consoled me. "The reality is that there is an election coming, and none of them knows if they will have a job in two months' time," he said. "At that briefing, we were just going through the motions. None of them can make any policy decisions."

"At least," he said, downing his drink, "I think they'll renew our funding. They like to think that knowledge matters."

**W**HEN THE CURRENT civil war began, in December 2013, with clashes between Machar's and Kiir's bodyguards, the UN was in disarray. No one, my friends told me, had expected this to happen. They might have joked about South Sudan being the world's newest failed state, but they believed in the project. The international community had spent billions of dollars state-building, and now the state was killing its population. This was not the plan; civil war was nowhere in the implementation matrix. The UN reacted in the only way it knew how. It made another plan—for what to do if the UN was attacked.

The only people to take the UN's mandate to protect civilians seriously were the civilians themselves. As violence broke out across the country, people fled into UN bases, leading to the creation of what became known as Protection of Civilians sites (PoCs). These camps swiftly housed over a hundred thousand people, often in deplorable conditions. That the UN opened its gates and allowed them in saved thousands of lives. From the very beginning, though, the UN hated the PoCs: the security-obsessed mission feared that the presence of civilians

whom the government called rebels so close to the UN could imperil the UN itself. While residents struggled to build lives in the camps, the UN insisted such sites were temporary, and started drawing up more plans, for how and when the civilians would leave. For the UN, the state's predatory behavior was a temporary exception, not another episode in the continuous rise of a military class that had sustained itself for decades by preying on the country's population. The UN continued to try to remain on good terms with the government and waited for Kiir's regime to remember the international plan. The mission could not acknowledge it had been building a fiction.

The military elite had no such problems. With the beginning of the war, most of the oil fields went offline, and commanders shifted back to second-civil-war-era means of gaining resources, as the fantasy of the state burned off like so much morning mist. Troops built landing strips for humanitarian flights in exactly the same places where they had existed during the second civil war. Gadet returned to Unity State. Nuer militias again contested the areas around the oil fields and looked to Khartoum for support. It soon became apparent, though, that it was Juba, not the rebels, that would become Sudan's closest ally, as the two countries united around a shared vision of future oil production. The same Nuer militias that had once fought the SPLA at the behest of Khartoum quickly became proxies for Juba, defending the oil fields against their Nuer brethren, as the SPLM showed that it too could split the opposition.

In DC, the diplomats wondered how to put pressure on the government. We need partners who want to sit at the table, they told me. All their sentences started with *the government will . . .* and I found myself getting angry and almost shouting at them: "There is no government. It's a military class that's ethnically cleansing territory." No one disagreed, but it didn't change anything. The diplomats lived in a world predicated on an "as if" structure. Privately, they might have acknowledged that there was no real unitary government in South Sudan, that it's a patchwork of local commanders. But State had to act as if Juba was a government: it needed to see a reflection in the mirror, and if it didn't find one, it was going to make one, damn the consequences.

**I** FINISHED MY PHD and started teaching in Chicago as the war entered its first rainy season. I was still working for the Swiss organization,

but I was no longer sure if I was moonlighting as a conflict researcher or pretending to be an academic. On December 2, 2014, I taught my last class of the year and graded my students' papers in Juba a few days later. I hadn't been back since the war started, and the capital had changed. The South Sudanese economy had tanked. The only vehicles left on the streets were SPLA trucks and white Toyota 4x4s, owned either by the government or by aid workers. The development set, now retooled as emergency workers of a permanent crisis, were even more isolated from South Sudan. The parties at NGO compounds continued, but security restrictions meant that it was rare to see internationals outside of a few restaurants, like a Green Zone interlaced through the city.

Two weeks later, I was in Unity State. The UN agencies with whom I normally organized flights had demurred. My work had become much more sensitive, they said. I might write something that upset the government. In the end, I took a private plane with a commander who still controlled the territory he had held during the second civil war. We had become friends, and he said he wanted to spend Christmas together. Back at the oil fields, close to where my car had broken down two years earlier, I spoke to the soldiers on guard.

War in South Sudan is not composed of endless battles. Instead, it's an endless waiting. Initially, if you were one of those young fighters at the oil fields, you would wait for future violence, and struggle to maintain a state of martial readiness. You were last paid six months ago, and all you have had to live on since then are pumpkin leaves and whatever else you can grow in soil polluted by oil. Sometimes, to be a soldier, you have to be a farmer, and as you wait, the line between the two blurs. You wait for war, hanging onto the thread of the satellite phone, waiting for a decision, for a battle, for the name of an enemy, while also worrying that the sorghum you have planted will bolt if you are called up to fight. No battle comes. You harvest the sorghum. Still there is no call. In South Sudan, it could be years. Soon, you begin to wait for the end of the war, when life can begin again, and you can return home and marry. It could be years. One day you forget why you are waiting and you have to acknowledge that your life—the pumpkin leaves and the checkpoints, the hunger and the boredom—is simply life; it is waiting.

When I got back to Juba, I had to once again brief the UN. During the war, getting information had become harder for the mission, so my fieldwork was even more valuable. Researchers are expected to earn

their keep, and hold their facts up overhead on return to the capital, as if returning with trophies. The analysts remained friendly. Elsewhere in the mission, I had become an enemy, after I reported on UN incompetence and failures. I thought about no longer talking to anyone now that they no longer let me fly on their planes. Do your research, I told myself, and get out. I didn't.

In Juba, analysts competed for access to the best information. UN meetings were devoted to a Kremlinology in which Kiir's appearance was analyzed for signs of failing health, as if the fate of the country lay in his trembling fingers. South Sudanese ministers turned up to meetings with NGO staff, only to find their every gesture analyzed by humanitarian witch doctors eager to divine the future. The best currency was gained by personally knowing someone who wasn't part of the international community. When I was in Juba, I would receive daily messages from analysts claiming to have an inside source who had revealed the truth about an impending split in the government coalition. The rumor would invariably be wrong, but who remembers that the next day?

To have a really good fact/rumor meant becoming known as someone with connections. Often, I have gone into UN meetings only to have whispered to me, as if it were a state secret, something I had told another analyst only an hour beforehand. These facts circulated within an information economy in which analysts desperately tried to understand the conflict beyond the barriers of the base, only to deploy it in the true war inside the mission: the war of careers.

International hopes were vested in a peace process partially designed by Americans. It envisioned a bipartisan, elite power-sharing agreement between the SPLM and the SPLA-IO—which is to say, the peace process was premised on a return to the CPA period, with Machar and Kiir back in power. In Unity State, meanwhile, civilians dreaded the making of peace agreements. In order to take part in the process, commanders needed to show they were militarily important enough to get a place at the negotiating table, and for that they needed soldiers. The bigger the force, the more resources and political power a commander could demand during negotiations. In the run-up to talks in Addis Ababa, some commanders would go village to village, forcibly recruiting young men. Others were more cunning. Briefcase generals arranged fictitious armies on the negotiating table, looking for a place in any future government in Juba. If they were successful, they would

use their acceptance within the negotiations as a recruiting tool—the promise of a salary and a weapon is an attractive prospect to a young man without a future. This is the game of the peace process. Much as the South Sudanese political elite had earlier instrumentalized state-building, they now used the peace process for their own ends.

**I**N JULY 2016, a peace agreement collapsed after the Americans pressured Machar into returning to Juba to form a government of national unity with Kiir—all done over his own objections, the opposition of his forces, and despite the presence of government troops throughout the city, in blatant violation of the terms of the agreement. Machar lasted three months before clashes in the capital gave Kiir's forces the opportunity to chase Machar all the way into the Democratic Republic of Congo, while the army looted aid warehouses and raped and killed civilians.

This produced a crisis for Kiir—he had destroyed the peace process and delegitimized his own government. In response, he performed a magic trick. In an internal coup, Machar's deputy, Taban Deng Gai, flipped sides, becoming the new head of the opposition, and thus the peace process could continue. It was absurd. Gai had no constituency in the opposition. He wasn't in control of anything. The international community ate it up. Susan Rice, then national security advisor, was among many in the Obama Administration who thought that Machar was an obstacle to peace and were happy to see him removed. In 2018, I talked to a former Obama-era staffer who was trying to work out where things had gone wrong. Basically, he said, we thought we had given Machar a chance, so why not try Gai?

In the months that followed, while the peace process stalled and the Americans persuaded the South Africans to put Machar under house arrest, Gai bribed and butchered his way across the country, recruiting forces by giving them license to pillage and rape in opposition areas, in an effort to force the SPLA-IO to acquiesce to his leadership and make his Potemkin position a reality. It didn't work. As the conflict fractured, the abbreviations proliferated. There was now the SPLA-IO [RM] (Riek Machar) to designate the actual opposition, and the SPLA-IO [TD] (Taban Deng) to designate the opposition in government. In Khartoum, Gadet brooded, remote from power, while the south of the country rose up against the government. Soon enough, there were more than twenty rebel groups in the country.

**A** YEAR LATER, I was back in DC. Machar was under house arrest in South Africa, and the conflict in South Sudan continued. A change of American administration had resulted in little change in its South Sudan policy—Trump hadn't filled the position of special envoy, and the same group of tired diplomats were going through the motions, waiting for Kiir's regime to wake up and be a responsible partner at the table. I had been invited to a meeting about the situation. Arrayed around the table were diplomats, American policy people, representatives of international organizations, and me. My academic career was not going well. I spent all my time on the phone to South Sudan. My father had died. I had published a number of reports that had not made me popular with the SPLM: detailed studies of the way its forces had ethnically cleansed areas of the country. I started getting death threats. On my most recent visit to South Sudan, I had been arrested by national security. It would have been a good time to leave and do something else. Instead, South Sudan was all I was doing, and there I was, once again at a narrow table. The meeting took place under the Chatham House Rule, which means that statements cannot be attributed to participants, so in what follows, I have named everyone *someone*.

Someone said: We need to look forward.

Someone whispered to me: How can we approach every crisis as if beginning all over again?

Someone said: What can we do now? That's the question.

Someone said: The new finance minister. He is a sign of hope. The real problem with South Sudan is that it is not yet financialized. He understands that.

Someone was from an international financial institution.

I said: His forces just used helicopter gunships to displace the Shilluk people from the east bank of the Nile. He has militias guarding the oil fields. That's why he's the finance minister.

Someone didn't say anything.

Someone else smirked.

I spent much of the morning wondering why I was invited to the meeting. Everyone was playing by such careful rules. Constrained by their

institutions, they tiptoed around the real issues. Their voices were not their own, while I shouted at the top of mine. Aren't they even offended by what I'm saying? Only days later did I work out that the smirker—who had invited me—knew what I was going to say. One of my wild speeches had allowed him to marginalize an enemy. I spoke for him, and said what he knew but couldn't say; I ended up playing the game without even realizing it. That's how knowledge makes a difference.

Someone said: We need to get Riek back. But not so much Riek. We need to broaden the opposition coalition. [He paused.] We need less Riek.

[Laughter]

And Kiir. We could all do with *a lot* less Kiir. Maybe someone else?

[Nervous laughter]

Who else?

[Silence]

I put up my hand, and I could see someone's eyes roll before I had even begun speaking: What you are suggesting is another power-sharing agreement between elites. It's a bunch of commanders who will force the South Sudanese population to fight for them in the rural peripheries. If you are serious about this, why not just organize regular payoffs to the commanders?

No one smirked.

At lunch, I stood outside, smoking furiously, where I was joined by another chain-smoker. I will call him Zinc. He was high up in the UN, and between inhales, he berated me for what I had said. It was immature, he told me. "As diplomats, we have to do the best we can within the givens. That's what it's about. I have to find a way to convince Kiir to allow Machar back, and to push Machar to have a more inclusive opposition movement. You say that's just another power-sharing agreement. Very well. That's what is on the table."

I spent the rest of the day in silence, watching Zinc manipulate his audience, expertly pushing and pulling, getting us where he wanted to go. I admired him. Here, I thought, was responsibility. Speech only matters in terms of what it can achieve. I cursed my own desire to say what I knew. I wanted to set everything on fire. Well, everything was already on fire. My problem was that I'd rather not touch the reality of

power. Better to burn in its light, happy in the knowledge that my ends are pure.

**B**Y SEPTEMBER 2018, I had left the University of Chicago, the death threats continued, and I had no home. More importantly, a new peace agreement had been signed in South Sudan. The conflict, though, had fragmented: the war was no longer between the Dinka and the Nuer, Kiir and Machar, but between a predatory elite in Juba and a series of marginalized peripheries, alternately attacked and instrumentalized by the capital. The ethnic divisions of the earlier part of the war had become blurred, and the class lines of the conflict clearer. I was still going to South Sudan, still writing reports, still denouncing everything with furious invective, while the rest of my life slipped away.

What on earth was I doing?

What made the situation so intractable is that within the destructive entanglement of the South Sudanese political elite and the international community, there was room to maneuver, just as in any apocalypse. I wrote the first report that chronicled the ethnic cleansing of the Shilluk people by government forces; my work in Unity State was used by the World Food Programme in their studies of famine. I was driven by intellectual energy—I wanted to understand the war—and I felt responsibility to my friends in South Sudan, a place to which I have devoted a decade of my life. I thought, at the margins of the conflict, I was doing some good.

One is always doing some good. But that's precisely the problem. A peace agreement was in place; it hadn't changed the logic of the war. The government coalition still attacked marginalized populations. Oil revenues were much reduced; the regime crept along. There was still a lot of money to be made from the aid industry. NGOs paid rent to landlords connected to the government. The regime also made money from logistics. One needed trucks to move food aid from Juba to Bentiu. The trucking companies were indirectly owned by businessmen close to the president. Along the route, trucks would encounter checkpoints. The cost of getting to Bentiu is close to \$20,000—money that goes to commanders, sustaining the conflict.

The humanitarian industry shapes the war in more subtle ways, too. Government-aligned militia forces pushed groups like the Shilluk off their land while denying access to humanitarians and the UN—the

better to conceal their attacks. After the Shilluk fled, the government went into the very towns they had cleansed and asked the aid agencies to come in and provide supplies. The displaced people that then returned were rewarded for supporting the government with some of the food aid, while the SPLA stole the rest. The humanitarian industry was not just feeding civilians; it was feeding the war. It maintained the economic basis of the regime, while international diplomatic efforts preserved the regime's legitimacy.

Sometimes, I asked my friends in the humanitarian world, surely you just have to stop?

This is the dead end I have reached in countless conversations. The humanitarian response is always the same: Would you have people die?

It wasn't a question of knowledge. The humanitarians are fully aware that the food and services they provide are shaping the conflict. Soldiers are hungry too. The immediacy of emergency short-circuits thought. For the humanitarians, there is no meaning in history: it's simply a pile of corpses, catastrophe after catastrophe. If humanitarians in South Sudan have a calling, it's to keep everyone alive one more day.

The diplomats I meet in Juba have an identical perspective, except the body they want to keep alive is the peace agreement. "We just need to get through one more dry season," a UN diplomat told me. "Then what," I asked. "Then, perhaps, things will change."

I WAS LAST IN JUBA at the beginning of 2020. Almost a decade after independence, the political elite still live in hotels. Every time I return, yet another impossibly obscene lodge has been built. The hip spot for Machar and co. was now Pyramid, a Pharaonic construction of sandstone and glass rising out of the rough earthen streets, surrounded by bodyguards and slums. Juba was humming. The revitalized peace agreement, signed in 2018, seemed to be succeeding. The country's political class were maneuvering for places in a new transitional administration. After seven years of war, Riek Machar was once again a vice president. The diplomats had won.

I had spent the day in the Palm, a hotel close to Pyramid, where I was interviewing military leaders about their plans for the national army. The dominance of Kiir's regime was total. The peace agreement was effectively a negotiated surrender. Machar and his allies had returned to Juba to beg for whatever scraps Kiir would fling from

the table. Meanwhile, in the rest of the country, Kiir's loyalists had recruited new militia forces, and minority populations were being displaced and killed, as the Americans enthusiastically began to discuss lifting sanctions.

It would all come too late for my old friend Gadet. After he left the SPLA-IO, he never managed to achieve the same degree of prominence. While he created his own organization, it had little support on the ground, as the Nuer flocked to younger commanders. On April 15, 2019, he died of hepatitis in Khartoum, surrounded by a small band of loyalists.

That night, I stood outside the Palm in the darkness, waiting for my driver to take me home. I was tired of it all. One more report, Joshua, in which you say everything. One more, then you are done. That's when I saw a figure emerge from the hotel: tall, graceful, and smirking. "Hi Joshua," said Denay, Gadet's former private secretary. "Do you need a lift?" He had inherited the leadership of Gadet's faction, and despite having no popular constituency in South Sudan, he played the game of peace negotiations skillfully. While his group was part of an opposition coalition, Denay had sold out to the government. It was rumored that Kiir would soon reward him for his treachery.

"It's been a long time, Denay," I said. "Yeah," he said. "I don't want to put you out," I told him. "Oh, no problem," he said. "I was just going to the supermarket to buy some toothpaste." I demurred. National security had already said a friendly hello to me that day, and as I said—I was tired.

By July 2020, Denay had, like a butterfly, first become minister of higher education and then the governor of Jonglei state. On September 4, David Shearer, the head of UNMISS, announced that South Sudan had seen a reduction in political violence, and it was now time to hand over control of the PoCs, the civilian camps on UN bases, to the government. Shearer and Denay signed the agreement for the Bor PoC, despite the fact that violence had increased in 2020 compared with 2019, and fighting continued all over the country. Nowhere had violence increased more than in Jonglei: as before, commanders and politicians preferred to fight their battles in the periphery, while the UN discounted such conflicts as banditry or traditional violence. The UN was eager to start state-building again, and in DC the Americans were talking—once again—of supporting the South Sudanese army. Through the administrations

of Bush, Obama, Trump, and now likely Biden, the basic diplomatic position remained unchanged. Everyone knew that the war continued, except now, once again, it was called peace. +