

Review – First Raise a Flag: How South Sudan Won the Longest War but Lost the Peace

Written by Cliff (Ubba) Kodero

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CLIFF (UBBA) KODERO, JAN 11 2021

First Raise a Flag: How South Sudan Won the Longest War but Lost the Peace

By Peter Martell

Hurst, 2018

On July 9th, 2011, South Sudan hoisted its flag amidst wild celebrations. Africa's largest country was splitting into two, and the South Sudanese people were tasting freedom for the first time in their history. The raising of the flag in Juba ended more than two decades of a civil war that had claimed millions of lives. Yet the frenzy of independence would not last forever. To the disappointment of many, South Sudan, descended into another deadly civil war about two years later. Peter Martell's *First Raise a Flag* explains why.

Martell's work is an exposition on how the pursuit of nationhood and statehood became a struggle for survival. He writes that "beneath the rhetoric of democracy, freedom, equality, and justice, there was no social contract between the government and the people" (p.xx). Rather than the consciousness of nationhood and apparatus of statehood, South Sudan has a "simple system where the military men in charge [buy] the loyalties and services they [need] from cash taken from oil." Instead of developing the nation, South Sudanese oil money funds a "brutal capitalist dictatorship of greed where the people's dreams [are] squandered for power" (p.xxi).

Ten years before independence, Martell had been a BBC correspondent in the Horn of Africa. This account derives from historical archives, eye-witnesses accounts, interviews with foreign agents, ex-British colonial officers, aid workers with colonial attitudes of Africans, and well-meaning citizens caught in the struggle for a better life amidst bleak prospects. Despite his lengthy resume of work in Eastern Africa, Martell is a *khawaja*, South Sudanese for "foreigner." While Sudanese elder Joseph Bading granted Martell permission to tell the story to the world (p.xix), *First Raise a Flag* remains an African story told by a British correspondent. Martell has an undoubtable right to compile the narrative, but few Africans would write this type of history. While the focus on civil war is heavy and uncomfortable, the honesty of his report and the credibility of his sources appeal to the reader's ethos. In *First Raise a Flag*, Martell pens what is perhaps his magnum opus in telling and showing why South's Sudan's pursuit of statehood, nationhood, and peace descends into conflict.

The narrative of *First Raise a Flag* evokes Adam Hochschild's *King Leopold's Ghost*, in which Hochschild explores the greed and savagery of colonial Africa in a manner that is accessible to scholars and the public alike. Another historical journalistic work of equal measure is Philip Gourevitch's *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will be Killed With Our Families* which highlighted gruesome details of a family afflicted by the Rwandan genocide. Like these two, *First Raise a Flag* is meticulously researched, revelatory, engrossing with insight, and unflinching in energy and elegy.

Martell's retelling of South Sudanese and, by extension, Sudanese history, reads like a complex novel. In Sudan, the Blacks developed a shared identity from centuries of war, slavery, and violence by defying the outsiders who committed ills (p.10). Racial discrimination and suffering united the southerners against Arabs. Yet their oppositional identity was not salient enough to create a nation. When the war for independence was at its cusp, fissures in ethnic

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identities emerged, and the political class began to scramble for power. As self-rule approached in 2005, tensions arose. Cattle rustling, sponsored and aided by enemies and local elites, became commonplace. The guns that had won the war on freedom now turned on the people they had helped. According to Martell, the “bond was based more on what South Sudan was not – its enemies – than what it was, its people. Not being Arab was useful for recruitment in the liberation war, but it was a thin and dangerous bond to unite a new nation” (p.162).

One strength of *First Raise a Flag* is that it does not offer shallow excuses for why South Sudanese independence was doomed. Martell does not entirely blame the politicians in Juba, nor does he condemn the British colonial officers or Khartoum elites. He plays the role of the neutral reporter, educating readers about the origins of the current quagmire. The Europeans, from tales told by the Greeks and Romans, had labeled Sudan a “lost world,” populated by people with “faces in their chests” (p.19). Nineteenth-century Ottomans Arabs and Turks violently raided the region, selling people and elephant tusks to the Middle East and instantly killing resisters. The Dinka described these events as “the time when the world was spoiled” (p.25).

The British replaced the Arabs and reluctantly occupied South Sudan after the Mahdists resistance in Khartoum. South Sudan attracted well-educated, adventurous, and upper-class British colonial officers nicknamed “the Bog Barons,” earning the region the epithet “Blacks ruled by Blues” (p.39). The British officers slowed the slave-trade but formed an apartheid system that separated the north from the south and restricted the movement of residents across the boundary. The British had hoped that “behind such a barrier, the Southern peoples would develop until they were able to stand on their own two feet and meet Northerners on equal terms” (p.40). In truth, the regions were separate and unequal with a thriving north and stagnating south. Slavery remained the backbone of the northern economy under the brand of “bonded labor” (p.39). Northerners considered the south a zoo (p.50).

In the 1950s, the clamor for independence resurrected visions for a better future in the south. British colonial administrators weighed the possibility of conjoining South Sudan to Uganda and Kenya as part of a British East Africa. Southern elders championed full independence, which was impractical since the region had no infrastructure. Eventually, they bullied South Sudan into forming an independent Sudan. The Bog Barons decided to leave Southern Sudan in the hands of elite Arabs from Khartoum who systemically disenfranchised, eliminated, and underdeveloped the south. Martell writes that “independence in Sudan was like telling people to stand on the edge of a precipice and take a step forward” (p.51).

One of *First Raise a Flag*’s original contributions is its detailed account of the international actors who facilitated the two wars of independence. Anya-Nya, the first secessionist attempt, which began in 1963, was led by Joseph Lagu, who sought help from the Mossad of Israel through an apartheid-hating, pro-Israel secret agent called Tarzan. The rebels had no weapons except for poisoned arrows and courage (p.72). An intricate Cold War dynamic led to complex alliances and rivalries involving Cuba, Congo, Israel, Kenya, Ethiopia, Libya, Egypt, USSR, Eritrea, and Uganda. Each player approached the region with specific interests, which sometimes altered. For example, Gaddafi shifted from backing the southern secessionists to fighting them in less than a decade. Ethiopia’s Haile Selassie adopted a neutral position, but Mengistu Hailemariam fully supported the secessionists upon Selassie’s ouster. As regional nations entered the theatre, the war became a “tit for tat chaos” realpolitik of “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” (p.91).

In August 1983, an army unit called the Torit Mutiny started a second civil war (p.107). American educated economist Dr. John Garang abandoned his post as an economics professor at the University of Khartoum to fight in the Sudanese Peoples Liberation Army (SPLA). Garang envisioned an SPLM that aimed at changing Sudan into what he called “New Sudan” (p.178). He had said, “Our objectives are very clear: We are fighting for a united Sudan within a democratic context” (p.113). Yet within SPLA, the idea of the “New Sudan” was not universally accepted. The war turned fratricidal, pitting various factions and different ethnic groups against each other. Riek Machar, who received a doctorate in strategic planning from Bradford in Britain, led the most threatening group of all. Machar wielded an alliance with Khartoum, splitting the rebels and establishing a new faction that divided the Southern Sudanese alongside ethnic lines: Nuers versus Dinkas (p.113).

With the southerners fighting amongst themselves, northern militias raided their villages. They enslaved children,

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selling them to the CIA for \$50 each. The CIA rescued them but, in the process, enabled the practice (p.142). These methods enraged Christians and human rights activists alike. Beginning in 2000, the United States led campaigns to the end war in Sudan. It was a curious case of an alliance involving Christian evangelicals, democracy proponents, African American anti-slavery groups, and celebrities, who all mounted pressure until Sudan achieved independence in 2011.

The crux of Martell's *First Raise Flag* is that South Sudan was set to fail. Everyone pretended that Sudan would be an exceptional democratic experiment. However, there was ample evidence that the country was hardly ready for independence and self-rule (p.4). The desired outcome was simply not feasible because South Sudan lacked the expertise, structure, nationhood, and resilience necessary for independence. The country's leaders were victims of war and inhuman treatment who had never witnessed better governance. In South Sudan during the CPA, Martell writes, it paid to become a rebel and claim a spot in the "big tent" (p.187). Corruption in Sudan is a function of history in which collective traumas pass through centuries of brutalization and neglect. South Sudan's journey as a nation will be facilitated by the exuberant energy of the ordinary folks, the hopefulness of children, and its citizens' bravery. Despite Martell's commitment to South Sudan, a better future will not be the work of outsiders but the voices of indigenes about their stories and aspirations. *First Raise a Flag*, adds to the count of African stories told by foreigners.

About the author:

Cliff (Ubba) Koderó holds a Ph.D. in International Relations with a focus on African affairs from Florida International University. He is currently a Visiting Professor of Political Economy at the College of Idaho. Ubba also runs a Pan-African YouTube Show The Ubba Koderó show, where he discusses African Affairs.