

BOOK REVIEW

ROBERT FISK, *THE GREAT WAR FOR CIVILISATION: THE CONQUEST OF THE MIDDLE EAST* (LONDON: HARPER PERRENIAL, 2005)

As a leading correspondent covering the Middle East since the mid-1970s Robert Fisk needs no introduction. At over 1300 pages Fisk's *The Great War for Civilisation: The Conquest of the Middle East* requires a considerable investment of time and energy to read. This investment, however, is well worth it for Fisk has produced a majestic, fearless and riveting account of the tragedy that has unfolded over the past thirty years in the Middle East and its adjacent regions.

The book unfolds in a more or less chronological pattern that shifts from different settings including Iran, Afghanistan, Iraq, Algeria, Armenia, Palestine, Israel, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Lebanon. Sporadically, Fisk reflects upon his troubled relationship with his father, a veteran of the First World War who was awarded a medal inscribed with the words "The Great War for Civilisation", which is part of the title of the book. The main narrative effortlessly flows along three principal channels.

The first is the broader historical context and role of actors who exercised command responsibility. This includes the policies adopted by successive US administrations as well as the local leaders who proved as, if not more, myopic, bloodthirsty, and incompetent than the American imperialists. Thus, a devastating critique of the Shah of Iran's police state, with its 60,000 member strong Savak, is placed alongside Yasser Arafat's rule over the Palestinian Authority which had fifteen different intelligence agencies. The Israelis, the Young Turks, the Soviets and the British come in for terrific criticism for their role in shaping the historical context through imperial highhandedness, raw greed and monumental ignorance. The most wrenching criticism, however, is reserved for the United States of America without whose systemic involvement neither al-Qaeda, nor Israel, would or could have emerged as rogue, destabilizing agents.

The second is the role that the Western news media has played in selling the conflict in the Middle East and manipulating the semantics of the conflict to soften the imbecility and arrogance of the policies of Western governments. CNN, BBC, Fox, *The New York Times*, *The Times of London*, are just some of the major news media concerns that come in for eviscerating criticism. Fisk places side by side, for instance, CNN's coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. When the Israeli's invade and occupy Arab land, or send their forces into Arab territory, the action is described as being one necessitated by Israeli's security concerns and the failure of the Palestinians to ensure their side of the bargain and prevent attacks on Israel. When retaliatory attacks take place, the description is that of terror attacks upon Israel. Indeed, the Western media concerns to a greater or lesser degree downplay the suffering of the Palestinians and conditions in their territories as well as the fact that their struggle is one against White Caucasian settler colonialism. No one dares state the obvious- that security is a consequence of peace, not a prerequisite.

The third is the impact that the events have had on the people who lived through them. Fisk places intense, personal, and highly moving accounts of those who have been tortured, raped, displaced, and brutalized by the conflicts. From the rape rooms of

Baathist Iraq, to the torture cells of Algeria, Iran and Afghanistan, to liquidations of hundreds of thousands of Armenians, Algerians, Marsh Arabs, Kurds, Iraqis, Iranians, Afghans, Sunnis, Shiah's, communists, liberals, traditionalists, Fisk is relentless in his effort to place before the reader the impact of the "Great War for Civilisation" upon its intended beneficiaries. This is what the leaders call collateral damage. It is impossible to not be moved by Fisk's detailed accounts of the cancer wards of Iraq after its water supply was poisoned by the depleted uranium used in American ammunition, or the hospitals of Iran as they received the victims of chemical weapons attacks in the 1980s or the innumerable other instances in the book. Fisk's use of macro-statistics and micro-facts is lethal to the moral and intellectual pretensions of those ultimately responsible and their propagandists and acolytes. As far as Fisk is concerned the task for journalists is to vigilantly and effectively observe the centers of power and the consequences that flow from their decisions.

The sheer volume of information, masterful analysis and a conceptually integrated perspective, combined with Fisk's magnetic journalistic style make *The Great War for Civilisation* compulsory reading for anyone interested in twentieth century history. The Ancient Roman naturalist, official, and lawyer, Pliny the Elder (AD 23-79) once said that "True glory consists in doing what deserves to be written; in writing what deserves to be read". Most people fail to live up to either side of Pliny's exhortation. Robert Fisk, however, has lived up to both.

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