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## Heroic Act of Witness: Dexter Filkins' *Forever War*

**T**he *New York Times*' relationship with the US military is a fraught one. On the one hand there are the conservative pundits who suggest that much of what "The Gray Lady" offers up as front page news is tantamount to a fifth column in American foreign policy. Those assertions are often devoured with Pavlovian zest in many military circles. And then.... And then there's Judith Miller, the former *Times* columnist whose front-page articles in the run-up to the US-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003 were as hawkish as they proved to be, in the end, dubious. Miller is no longer with the *New York Times*, but her *cause célèbre*, of course, remains. Informed geo-pol-mil analysts disagree as to the future prospects for Iraq, but as the violence-marred Iraqi elections of March 7, 2010 indicate, one thing is for certain, and that's continued instability for the foreseeable future.

These factors make for the rather textured backdrop of the award-winning book *The Forever War* by *New York Times* columnist Dexter Filkins. Indeed it is a backdrop which makes the book's accomplishments all the more astonishing. In a sense, Filkins serves as something of a synthesis between Ernie Pyle, the popular war correspondent covering the "good" war in the European and Pacific theaters in the 1940s, and David Halberstam, the considerably more controversial journalist covering a much more polarizing event in southeast Asia in the 1960s and 70s. Filkins' beat takes him to the front lines of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (insofar as front lines exist in those places), wars which we increasingly love to hate. For his subjects Filkins' has the soldiers and marines whose sacrifices we admire and appreciate (insofar as we're reminded or even aware of them), but whose sacrifices also exact an inestimable toll. *LA Times* journalist Tim Rutten calls Filkins' efforts

in *The Forever War* a “heroic act of witness.” I’ll confess I don’t know exactly what Rutten means by the term, and I’d guess, after having read the book along with a number of Filkins’ subsequent dispatches from Afghanistan, that Filkins himself would be somewhat uncomfortable with the description. Nonetheless, in *The Forever War* Filkins gives us a “warts-and-all” look at the complexity of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as the consequences of these conflicts on the people called upon to prosecute them. The image that emerges is at once beautiful and deeply, profoundly troubling.

The book resonates not only by virtue of Filkins’ extraordinary powers of observation. It also works because few westerners are as well-acquainted with the people, customs, and issues of these regions as Filkins is. Filkins began observing the Taliban in the late 90s, when he was the New Delhi bureau chief for the *LA Times*. In the first, brief part of the book, Filkins recalls some of his observations from those “innocent” days prior to September 11 while on assignment in Kabul, Afghanistan. Hindsight is always clear-eyed, but Filkins nonetheless artfully captures the competing tensions that will animate much of what follows when his journeys take him to Iraq. There is the terror of the Taliban in their white Toyota Hi-Luxes, those fearsome symbols of power and authority that speak volumes in a land where modern technology is largely foreign. “They were the baddest asses in town,” Filkins says of the Taliban, “and they knew it, too.... Their strength,” he adds, “was their ignorance.” He doesn’t admire them, at least not in the traditional sense, but he understands their rise to power. “Anarchy had taken over,” he observes, “and the Taliban were the only guys mean enough and dark enough to wrestle it back to dusty earth.”<sup>1</sup>

But it is the anarchy and mean, tough men of Iraq that Filkins treats at much greater length in the book, however. In March of 2003 Filkins embedded with a company of US Marines—themselves mean, tough men whose job it is to restore order and defeat a mean, tough enemy. “They were trained killers, after all,” Filkins says of the men he accompanies into battle. “They could hit a guy at five hundred yards or cut his throat from ear-to-ear. And they didn’t ask a lot of questions. They had faith, they did what they were told and they killed people.... Out there in Falluja, in the streets,” Filkins concludes, “I was happy they were in front of me.”<sup>2</sup>

This seemingly melodramatic observation presages the book’s defining moment, however. Filkins and his photographer Ashley Gilbertson “needed a corpse for the newspaper,” we’re told, so the two proceed, along with a dozen Marines, to a minaret from which the Marines had been taking a barrage of fire and which they

had eventually nearly destroyed. “We’ll go first,” two Marines nonchalantly tell Filkins and his photographer. “The stairs squeaked as we went up,” Filkins recalls.

It was a narrow staircase, winding, just wide enough for your body. A nautilus, maybe a hundred feet high. Not very stable. Dark, too, but for the holes shot by the tank. I could see beams of light above. I slowed my step. The shot was loud inside the staircase, and I couldn’t see much, because the second marine was falling backwards, falling onto Ashley, who fell onto me. Warm liquid splattered on my face. Three of us tumbled backwards out of the doorway.<sup>3</sup>

Another gun battle erupts as Filkins and Gilbertson stumble out of the minaret. As the fighting continues, two other marines carry out William Miller, the 22-year-old lance corporal from Pearland, Texas who had led the way up the winding staircase. Filkins continues:

His face was opened in a large V, split like meat, fish maybe, with the two sides jiggling.

“Please tell me he’s not dead,” Ash said. “Please tell me.”

“He’s dead,” I said.<sup>4</sup>

It is the crucial utterance of the book. Even the platoon commander’s blunt accusation to Filkins and Gilbertson following the event—“Yeah, it was your fault,” the lieutenant tells the two—pales in comparison. Miller’s death invariably colors all of what follows in the book, and in many ways reshapes the reader’s understanding of what has come before. Filkins is, understandably, haunted by the event. One can’t help but wonder if in some way the very sympathetic treatment he gives what are, at the end of the day, blood-thirsty marines in the pages of this book isn’t atonement for the feeling that his actions—a photo-op, no less—cost a young man his life. The death of one marine lance corporal, then, in the bombed-out staircase of a minaret in Falluja, Iraq becomes the impetus for Filkins’ meticulous rendering of a difficult and controversial conflict, a conflict initiated under exceedingly questionable circumstances, and which gobbles up resources and blood treasure. Yet in the midst of this conflict, selfless marines emerge resolved, dignified, noble—put on display and ready for consumption in the pages of *The New York Times* and, later, in a best-selling book, forcing Americans once again to rethink this war and, particularly, those who help wage it. In this respect I am

reminded of a term coined by former Commandant of the Marine Corps General Charles C. Krulak. "In many cases," Krulak wrote in the January 1999 edition of *Marines Magazine*,

the individual Marine will be the most conspicuous symbol of American foreign policy and will potentially influence not only the immediate tactical situation, but the operational and strategic levels as well. His actions, therefore, will directly impact the outcome of the larger operation; and he will become...the Strategic Corporal.<sup>5</sup>

The import of one person in a hostile conflict involving hundreds, thousands, or tens of thousands is nothing new, to be sure. Marlowe reminds us it was Helen's "face that launch'd a thousand ships / and burnt the topless towers of Ilium," after all. And of course we've already seen evidence of strategic corporals in Operation Iraqi Freedom, long before Filkins' *Forever War*. In April 2004, the TV news-magazine *60 Minutes II* profiled the abuse of Iraqi prisoners by US service members at Abu Ghraib. The coverage generated a firestorm of controversy. The instinctive reaction in much of the Defense Department, from the "E" Ring of the Pentagon to classrooms at the US Air Force Academy, was virtually identical: *these half dozen or so jackasses have cost us the war*. But Filkins' book rescues the concept of the strategic corporal from the nightmare that is Abu Ghraib, and reminds us that the idea works both ways. And it does so thoughtfully, painstakingly, without resorting to jingoism or the reductive, righteously indignant thinking that asserts that our cause in Iraq was a noble and right and just one.

I suggested earlier that *The Forever War* seems to split the difference, as it were, between Pyle and Halberstam. Such a premise points up the uniqueness of the positions Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom occupy in the recent history of America's "long wars." Pyle, of course, chronicled a "just cause," and the soldiers who fight in that cause were seen as heroes. The Vietnam War, meanwhile, was a debacle, and its veterans were, for too long, at least, reviled. In these modern campaigns, however, the operations themselves come under intense criticism, but for most part the soldiers, sailors, marines, and airmen who participate in them earn the respect and admiration of their countrymen.

But the book is more than just a lionizing of fallen heroes, and not all service members emerge uncompromised, as evidenced by Filkins' portrayal of Army Lieutenant Colonel Nathan Sassaman. When we first meet Sassaman he is the all-American soldier: West Point graduate, former star quarterback, son of a

Methodist minister. “In the fall of 2003,” Filkins writes, Sassaman “was the most impressive American field commander in Iraq. He was witty, bright and relentless, the embodiment of the best that America could offer.” Here again I’m reminded of Halberstam, whose book *The Best and the Brightest* examines the privileges and pedigrees of those who, despite their sensibilities and extraordinary native abilities, led the country into the morass of Vietnam. “His men loved him,” Filkins says of Sassaman. “[...] It seemed, on those good days, that it just might work, despite all the problems, because of people like him.”<sup>6</sup>

But with the change in the political and military landscape in Iraq, so, too, comes the inexorable change in the overachieving Sassaman. It is a change that Filkins chronicles mournfully, without being judgmental. Filkins wonders “not only what the Americans were doing to Iraq, but what Iraq was doing to the Americans,” and Sassaman is the lens through which observes this troubling metamorphosis. “Sometimes [he] seemed like two people,” Filkins notes reluctantly, “the visionary American officer setting up a city council, and the warrior who took too much joy in the brutalities of his job.” Even Sassaman himself admits, “It’s like Jekyll and Hyde out here.”<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately for Sassaman, it is an analogy which he only sees as applicable to his situation. The extent to which he recognizes the phenomenon in *himself*; however, Filkins leaves unsaid. When we learn that Sassaman’s career ends because he encouraged several of his men to lie to military investigators about their involvement in the drowning deaths of two Iraqis they’d detained, we are not surprised. We’ve seen something like this coming. Yet we grieve, strangely, not altogether unlike the way we do with loss of Miller. We grieve the loss of innocence, and we bewail the apparent waste of potential. *This didn’t have to happen....*

In the book’s epilogue Filkins recalls a conversation with a friend who had recently remarked to him that he couldn’t have a conversation about events in Iraq with anyone who had not been there. “I told him,” Filkins remarks soberly, “I couldn’t have a conversation with anyone who hadn’t been there *about anything at all*.”<sup>8</sup> But we *can* converse, and we do. Perhaps that we can further this conversation, about these wars and their consequences on the men and women they affect—in the blogosphere, in the classrooms at our service academies, and in institutions of higher learning around the world—is the true gift of Filkins’ “heroic act of witness.”

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Dexter Filkins, *The Forever War* (New York: Knopf, 2008), 25-26, 28.

2. Ibid., 199.
3. Ibid., 208.
4. Ibid., 210.
5. Charles C. Krulak, "The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three-Block War," *Marines Magazine* (January 1999), on-line at <[www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/usmc/strategic\\_corporal.htm](http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/usmc/strategic_corporal.htm)>, accessed 22 February 2010.
6. Ibid., 150, 151.
7. Ibid., 152.
8. Ibid., 340. Emphasis added.

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