

Book Review

The Great War for Civilisation

The Great War for Civilisation - the conquest of the Middle East.

Robert Fisk

pages 1350

Harper Perennial (revised edition) 2006

THE BUSH AGENDA - invading the world, one economy at a time.

Antonia Juhasz

pages 386

ReganBooks / HarperCollins 2006

What Happened Here - Bush Chronicles.

Eliot Weinberger

pages 225

Verso 2006

SO THAT's the Democrats back in control of Congress and the front-man for the occupation of Iraq - perhaps the worst managed imperial adventure in history - isolated in his White House with no Rumsfeld to lean on and another two years to go. In these two years, the documentary record of policy with regard to Iraq will come under intense scrutiny. It remains to be seen just what documented skullduggery might yet come to light, not least with regard to the Fettes Whore who trots at the strutting heel of Bush the Son: that Colossus of Freedom, that Leviathan of Democracy.

What happened in Iraq is already perfectly clear, of course. A junta in America's corporate and neo-Conservative foreign policy establishments saw an opportunity to use American military might in the cause of destroying Iraq, establishing in its place a post-modernist Fort Laramie for the strategic domination of the region, and so ensure preferential -and fantastically profitable - American access to its oil and gas resources. For this, Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction and the neo-Narodnik spectacle of the Two Big Towers were timely and highly convenient excuses.

Had the venture been properly managed, it might even have worked - and established US hegemony in the Middle East for the next quarter- or half-century. But it did not, has not and - according to all the present signs - will not. Iraq, certainly, along with its once-glorious capital, has been destroyed - and the Middle East is more unstable than ever, and America's position there even more exposed than ever.

The why and the how of this murderous imperialist disaster for the people of the region is the subject of the three books reviewed here - not least of them, Robert Fisk's magisterial memoir of his thirty years covering the conflicts of the Middle East. In the shadow of Fox News (and, at times, the BBC) one hesitates to describe Fisk as a 'journalist'. After all, Western 'reporting' of the seemingly endemic wars and troubles that arc from Lebanon to the far and dusty shores of Afghanistan bring no credit on what - at times - can be an honourable trade. But Fisk is indeed a journalist - and a writer and historian - of the highest quality and integrity, and his mighty epic of reportage is lyrical in its detail, savage in its judgements, and enormously and expertly informed in turn.

The book recalls the Armenian Holocaust of 1915 (a Holocaust denied by Simon Peres of Israel), and casts a jaundiced eye over Britain's own last adventure in armed imperialism at Suez, as well as the fearsome bloodbath inherited by the Algerians in the wake of the long French imperial venture there. Nor does Fisk omit scrutiny of the popular overthrow of that US satrap, the Iranian Shah, in the 1970s, and the terrible war between Iraq and Iran in the 1980s. But Fisk also brings his critical eye to rather more recent events in the region - the first invasion of Iraq by America and her puppets, the terrible reign of sanctions that followed there, and the post 9-11 invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. And then, of course, there is the continuing situation in Palestine

None of this, it can be said with absolute certainty, make pretty reading, from the corrupt proto-fascist regimes kept in power by the Americans to the extensive use of depleted uranium ordnance in Bush the Father's invasion of Iraq. Naturally, the intelligent Western reader will be aware that Fisk's allegations about the subsequent plague of tumours, gangrenes, missing limbs, child mastectomies and congenital shrunken heads can, of course, be no more than an Islamist lie.

After all, they were denied by no less an authority on these matters than Douglas Henderson, Britain's then-minister for the armed forces, who felt able to opine in 1998 that, 'the Government has not seen any peer-reviewed epidemiological research data on this population to support these claims and it would therefore be premature to comment on this matter'.

Or what about the extensive physical destruction of the socialist and communist Lefts throughout so much of the Arab and Muslim worlds, at the bloody hands of secular-fascist and clerical-

fascist regimes - a subject surely worthy of a book in itself, and one which would doubtless be wondrously illuminated by the files of the CIA? Among other things, after all, this might help explain why so much of the anti-imperialist struggle in those worlds is in the hands of reactionary Islamists - tholed to a powerless politics of gesture and rhetoric born ineluctably from a long history of humiliation and defeat.

Nor does Fisk flinch from comment on the extraordinary lockgrip that America's Zionist lobby has on American media and political debate on Palestine, or on America's policies there (to no discernible advantage to the United States either). And the Western media does not emerge with much credit at all from Fisk's account of coverage of recent imperial adventures in the Middle East - journalists as fans with gasmasks, embedded propagandists, characterised by enormous self-importance and equally enormous ignorance, and all in thrall to that unwritten but immensely powerful code of self-censorship and 'balance'.

But what does this matter in the grand scheme of things? After all, when the Americans occupied Baghdad they watched all the ministries burn down (apart, of course, from the ministries of oil and the interior), along with the national library and archives and the capital's collection of priceless Korans.

In all, this book is a testament to Fisk's moral and often physical courage and energy. It is one of the great books of journalism, and one of the great books about journalism. It is also one of the great books in English about the Arab and Muslim world in the Middle East and beyond. Where, one wonders, is that world's version of Fisk working from Europe today?

Antonia Juhasz is an economist and international-trade specialist, and her book is as readable as it is - largely - non-technical. Seldom does a title match as precisely as this one the material explored within its covers - 'the corporations, the neo-conservatives and the George W. Bush administration are three inter-locking groups with fluid demarcations. Iraq represents several things to these players: oil, wealth, regional power and global power. Iraq presents them with the first opportunity for a truly imperial invasion - as President Bush has repeatedly said, Iraq is only the beginning'.

Her focus is particularly on US trade policy, and the role played therein by the major corporations of Bechtel, Lockheed Martin, Chevron and Halliburton: and - more widely - the complementary role played by the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the World Trade Organisation, and US-dominated 'free-trade areas'.

As for her 'Bush Agenda': 'This agenda predates the current president, however, and its advocates certainly hope that it will outlast him.....'freer trade for a free world' refers to specific economic policies designed especially to support key US multinational corporations that are used as veritable weapons of war.....The 'freer and safer world' is ultimately one of an ever-expanding American empire driven forward by the growing powers of the nation's largest multinational corporations and unrivalled military'.

And thus while half-a-million Iraqi children died as a result of sanctions, the corporations prepared to step forward and take their profits. As Juhasz says, 'The corporations would gain access to the world's second largest oil supply and all of the wealth it generates, and the politicians would have a regional ally from which to protect

Israel and guarantee US access and hegemony over the entire region as well as much of the world’.

As with oil, so with fresh water. ‘After its oil, water is Iraq’s second most valuable resource. Iraq is home to the most extensive river system in the Middle East, including the Tigris and Euphrates America could alter the destiny of the Middle East in a way that probably could not be challenged for decades - not solely by controlling Iraq’s oil, but by controlling its water’.

So far, of course, all this has led to the quagmire of invasion and occupation: but there is still the planned ‘free-trade area of the Middle East’ to come. All in all, it make the European Union sound like an increasingly good idea.

Weinberger’s book, meantime, is a slighter one but no less excoriating. Of Bush’s second election victory, Weinberger writes, ‘The United States has suffered the first coup d’état in its history. Although no tanks circled the White House and no blood was shed, the word ‘coup’ is only slightly hyperbolic. An illegality was declared legal, [and] a corrupt usurpation of power did indeed take place in the nation that imagines itself the world’s beacon of freedom’.

And again, ‘The United States in a Banana Republic with a lot of money. It is perhaps the most perfect form of Banana Republic. Its generals do not have to seize power, or even concern themselves with those tedious, domestic, non-military matters, for regardless of who the ostensible leader of the government is, the generals always get what they want: lots and lots of toys to play with If one considers so-called ‘intelligence’ as part of defense, approximately two-thirds of the American tax dollar goes to the generals’.

Meantime, 25% of US children live in poverty, 20% can't find the USA on a map of the world, and the total number of all classes of translated literary books published each year is just 250.

And meantime too, back in Baghdad: for 500 years, 'it was the most cosmopolitan city in the world of the time, with ships docked at the confluence of the Tigris and the Euphrates from China, India, Russia, Spain, the North and Black African kingdoms; with its schools of painting, poetry, philosophy, astronomy, philology, mathematics; its translations of the Greek texts that would ultimately impel the European Renaissance'.

But all that, of course, was in the days before the democratic glories of Pax Americana.

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