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 Forever War: Dexter Filkins
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Dexter Filkins offers first hand testimony of the current Iraqi war. His account depicts a country heavily immersed in violence and depravation. His hauntingly vivid experiences shed light on a situation both bleak and largely misunderstood. Filkins is able to cunningly convey the intricacy of the senseless carnage plaguing Iraq. He depicts the point of view of the American occupiers while simultaneously sifting through his rolodex of intimate exchanges with a vast array of Iraqis. In the process Filkins affirms there is a rampant disconnect between Washington’s rhetoric about the war, and the unadulterated status quo that summarizes the country. Mounting frustrations plague the embattled country. The milieu that Filkins encountered in Iraq’s fostered collateral damage for Americans and Iraqis alike. The mounting toll of the Iraqi war is the product of a number of factors which Filkins diligently explores. His revelations demand introspection from his readers as they are forced to confront the limitation of their own knowledge regarding the war. Moreover, his story evokes a sense of empathy for Iraqis who have to endure unthinkable hardship. Violence and oppression have become normalized fixtures of Iraqis daily lives. Vindictive coercion has erected a permanent state of paranoia within the country. The looming threat of violence and subjugation wreaked havoc on a daily basis, proving beyond any reasonable doubt that the mission is far from accomplished in Iraq. Furthermore, Filkins knowledge makes any victory seem unfathomable.

Filkins experiences were multifaceted in both form and content. His insights are uniquely appealing due to his extensive interaction with ‘both sides of the gun’. He is able to draw upon being alongside American armed forces, at the height of intense firefights in areas like Fallujah. While also garnering perspectives from the onslaught of diplomatic discourse he directly observed. A recurring theme Filkins accords special attention to is citing how American forces were disproportionality young and often from rural areas. Time and time again Filkins refers to the soldiers as “kids’, often tracing their geographical location in the process. With only 1.4 million people enlisted in America’s arm forces, it is vital that people like Filkins help bridge the ‘disconnect’ between our servicemen and women, and civilains. Filkins wanted to demand his readers consider how a small portion of younger rural Americans have had to disproportionately incur the most damage for the current American occupation of Iraq. Many of these soldiers were from “a town whose name I don’t know”. He consciously evokes the sentiment that perhaps if these soldiers were not so young maybe the conflicts would have been carried out differently. He by no means questions their valor, but does construct the train of thought that maybe nineteen year olds do not yet have the maturity level to be jettisoned into an unfamiliar and highly fractured culture. The monumental task these “kids” were charged with was only further muddled by the elusiveness of the enemy. Filkins bemoans the fact that American troops were largely unprepared for the mission they were eventually tasked with. As proofed, “They hadn’t received any instruction on holding elections or setting up police departments. No one in the unit spoke more than a few words of Arabic” (152). ‘Uncle Sam’s’ troops are highly proficient killers who were best suited for eradicating a large army like those seen WWII. With the insurgency groups in Iraq allegiances were in a constant state of flux. America’s enemies were not readily identifiable, which only exacerbated the difficulty of tracking and vanquishing the hostiles. Filkins discussed how the inherently difficult task of discerning its enemies ushered in a slew of suspect arrests by the Americans. Innocent Iraqis were being rounded up and interrogated with great regularity simply because America’s enemies were “lurking in the shadows”. For Filkins the ongoing practice of these iffy arrests by the Americans only served to swell the ranks of the insurgency. This is merely a microcosm of the self-defeating tactics employed by the Americans.

Filkins sheds light on how Iraqis became increasingly adept at living a “double life”, as the occupation progressed. He notes that citizens were putting up a façade for the Americans to gain economic incentives and imply tolerance. While in reality the resentment for the American occupation was widespread. Filkins explains that it would not be uncommon for Iraqi’s working directly for the Americans to ‘play the role” of welcoming allies when it behooved them to. Nevertheless a deep seeded resentment for Americans remained unscathed. For Filkins the notion of American troops mission being centered on winning the “hearts and minds” of the citizens was little more than a utopian preference that was entirely unattainable. The Iraqis might accept American monetary bestowments, but deception largely defined the ethos of a typical Iraqi citizen’s interaction with the occupiers.

One disconnect Filkins helps to refute is that the insurgency were underfunded forced to use obsolete weaponry. Granted the insurgency’s armament did not rival America’s ordinance, but often times the insurgency was being aided by an international network of financiers. “The IEDs were getting bigger and more sophisticated: a typical roadside bomb now consisted of a stack of antitank mines triggered by a call from a cell phone, and the insurgents had money, more than the Americans.” (157) Monetary contributions to the insurgency sprang from people who viewed Iraq as an arena to prove their displeasure for the Westernization of the world. Furthermore, Filkins refers to the likelihood that Iraqis who were allocated funds by America to carry out various projects were purportedly donating to the insurgency. So in effect America was paying for the bombs and bullets that were inflicting bodily harm to their own troops. The absurdity of inadvertently funding the enemy is just one of the seemingly endless amounts of moral quagmires that ran rampant in Iraq.

Filkins articulates how bombings went on unabated, often with Iraqi citizens incurring the damage. For Filkins the insurgency seems to operate under the assumption that silence from civilians equated to complicit consent with the Americans. He felt that many insurgents operated under a ‘with us, or against us’ imperative that made them impervious to Iraqi civilians being killed in the process of sabotaging American interests. The degree of regularity that the suicide and car bombings were being orchestrated in Iraq is astounding. For Filkins it surely contributed to the sense of paranoia and fear that permeated Iraq. “In the first five years, more than nine hundred people detonated themselves in Iraq, sometimes several in a single day. That was before you counted the car bombs, when the driver got out before it exploded. There were thousands of those.” (168). These heinous attacks would be strategically carried out when the number of casualties could be maximized. These bombings were meant to instill fear, and incite Iraqis to accept that as long as the American occupation remained the bombings would be relentless.

Filkins was particularly critical of how foreign jihads were able to enter Iraq with such ease. As illustrated by a pamphlet Filkins found circulating in Iraq that succinctly summarizes the steps hostiles could take to enter Iraq unbeknownst.

“Go to Syria first the manual said, and make sure you tell the immigration authorities that you are going to Turkey next. That way, they’ll give you a transit visa and everyone will be sufficiently fooled. Take a bus to the Iraqi border, wear jeans and eat donuts and use a Walkman which has a tape of any singer. Do this for Allah’s sake; war is tricks.”(168)

Realties dictated by the conflict were very unsettling for Filkins. Extensive and strategic bombing did irrevocable damage to the infrastructure and power grid of Baghdad. It is often said “all is fair in war”, but no electricity meant hospitals could not provide adequate help to injured Iraqis who were innocent bystanders to the conflict. Filkins rightfully considered it heinous that in Iraq babies lives were jeopardized by the fact that incubators could not be run. He should be readily commended for leaving ‘no stone unturned’, when delving into the rippled affects the conflict brought about. Consider that Filkins was self-disparaging about the fact that he and the marines he was with would break into random homes of Iraqi citizens and use their personal toilets until they were overflowing and no longer functioning. He knew the level of insult and degradation this act represented, but also made it clear there were not really any other viable alternative options. Filkins included testimonies like the random ‘toilet invasions’ as an attempt to bridge the gap of understanding of those who had been to Iraq and the majority of us who have not. When military campaigns are taking place abroad it is easy to lose sight of how regular citizens must bear the blunt of the upheaval. Iraqis largely accepted that Saddam losing his vice grip on power was a good thing. Nevertheless, it became readily apparent that a typical Iraqi citizen was much more likely to die in a post Saddam Iraq, than they were when Hussein had been in power.

Filkins was struck with how violence came to be normalized for the Iraqi citizens. Bombings and bloodshed became so commonplace, everyday citizens there would barely flinch at the sound of bombs exploding or the ensuing firefights. For Filkins exposure to war irrevocably changes people. He manifested this change, people supersede fear through the heightened stress war brings about. For Filkins one does not have to be pulling the trigger to come to know the horrors of war. Whether by conscious choice or an innate human instinct people respond to their environment. Filkins was awestruck at the conviction Iraqi’s clung to in order to go about their daily lives in spite of the fact that their country was rife with danger. Filkins was quick to credit the Iraqis who came out in force making an earnest attempt to help nurture the fragile possibility of democracy in Iraq. Despite their testament to the human spirit these Iraqis who attempted to rally around each other were systemically targeted by hostiles who rejected the notion of government centered on American ideals. Dexter Filkins described the conscious targeting of Iraqis who had bravely started to participate in the newly budding democracy. “Thousands and thousands of them: editors, pamphleteers, judges and police officers. The insurgents were brilliant at that. They could spot a fine mind or a tender soul wherever it might be, chase it down and kill it dead. The heart of a nation. The precision was astounding.”(82)

“The sectarian war in Iraq developed its own vocabulary, its own rituals. Often, for instance, the cleansing of a neighborhood began with notes slipped under people’s doors.” (320). The sharp divide between Sunni and Shiite Muslims in Iraq paved the way for scare tactics and inhumane physical coercion to serve as the instruments for both sects. The heavily engrained tension culminated in kidnappings and torture. Often the private militias of the various insurgent groups were simply more powerful than the police force, or in some cases the individuals responsible for the rampant atrocities were the police force.

Filkins came to view America’s efforts in Iraq as futile. While the U.S. was trying to supplant the anarchy with democratic reform their tenuous grip on the occupation slipped further and further away. Even charity seemed to crumble in Iraq, ‘The Americans painted a school and the insurgents shot the teachers. The Americans threw candy to the kids and the kids called it poison.”(83) Everywhere the futility of the American efforts pervaded Iraq. The U.S. advocated holding caucuses to appoint representatives. Filkins was confronted with a problem in this logic, “The word caucus does not exist in Arabic” (83) To Filkins astonishment even as voting polls were being mortared and Iraqis dissuaded by the insurgency from participating people still came out in large numbers. In many ways Filkins offers some of his most spirited praise to these citizens who grasped what was trying to be done through the democratic reforms. On the flip side, I feel those people represent his biggest disappointments with Iraq. He was able to witness a core of Iraqis who earnestly wanted to help foster in a better way of life for their country. These people’s zeal was rewarded with vindictive violence that marginalized their efforts. Filkins forces readers to confront what happened to these people as areas like Fallujah deteriorated beyond a point of no return. For Filkins failure was not rooted in an unwillingness to undergo the ‘democratic experiment’. Rather the eventual shortcomings could be traced to the inability to protect those Iraqi’s who were willing to put a personal stake in the process.

Filkins experiences helped communicate the frustration of mounting American casualties and frivolous American spending in Iraq that did not seem to be paying dividends. Both of these factors did generate a growing public discontent about the Iraq war in America. An underlying factor of the dwindling support for the war by the American public was the lack of a cohesive plan for a post-war Iraq. The policies that were implemented were short sighted and allowed the problematic and ever growing insurgency groups to bolster their position.

 “Two realities developed in Iraq. Inside the Green Zone, Bremer and his staff produced one hundred new laws that were intended to transform Iraq into what America wanted it to be. Some were pet conservative projects like Bremer’s decree imposing a flat 15 percent income tax in a country with no taxes; while others dealt with matters like copyrights, patents, telecommunications, and border controls. Meanwhile, outside the Green Zone, the Shiite leaders were building their new Islamic state; insurgents took over Sunni Arab lands.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Bremer an illogical appointment to oversee the democratic transformation in Iraq by all accounts was fantastically inept. He was being given reliable information that Iraq’s government and police force were not going to be up to the task of ‘taking the reins’ of the country by the deadline Bremer had laid out. According to Filkins the pleas Bremer was presented with by his Iraqi counterparts were undermined and disregarded. As proofed by his response to Iraqi advice to postpone the transfer of power, “People are going to have to learn faster.”(143) His desire to cede the power arouse from the situation dwindling further out of control. Filkins bemoans Bremer because within a month of this stoic response to the pleas concerning Iraq’s fragility the situation floundered. “Across southern Iraq, government buildings, police stations, civil defense garrisons and the other installations set up by the Americans were sacked and overrun. Overnight, the Iraqi police, the Iraqi national guard, and the Iraqi army disappeared.”(144). All the efforts that had gone into fortifying Iraq’s security were washed away. Filkins recognized American bureaucrats were trying to improvise a plan of attack as the power in Iraq was being concentrated. Clout was being allocated to political parties and insurgent groups that were eradicating any semblance of American progress. Filkins cited the testimony of an Iraqi female who was participating in the voting process. “The Americans, the British. I am sorry to be impolite. But you destroyed our country, and you called it democracy. Democracy it is just talking.”(244). Ultimately the American public was forced to make the harsh realization that their compatriots were being sent back in coffins without any marked victory to show for it. Tax payer’s dollars were going to a remote part of the world to usher in democracy and seize nuclear weapons. Only there were no weapons of mass destruction. What had been pitched as a humanitarian campaign to make the world safer devolved beyond the scope of any American remedy. Filkins illustrated our presence there only fueled a growing anti-American sentiment. In such a highly fragmented country one of the few commonalties that vying groups shared was a vehement disdain for our ongoing presence there. What is worse is our beleaguered reputation was not bringing further stability to the country.

Fanatics who advocate murder have gained political advantages. “Mehdi fighters staged uprisings against US-led forces in April and August 2004, but their leader Mr. Sadr has since become involved in the political process and holds 30 seats in the Shia bloc that dominates parliament.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Filkins attributes American passivity as allowing Muqtada to capitalize on the loyalty of his supporters. “The Americans thought it best not to think about Muqtada, convincing themselves that the political process was representative without him” (247) This recurring theme of America being intentionally ignorant has compromised the entire occupation. When America needed to be it was ignorant of what constituted torture. When it needed to be it was entirely ignorant of the plight posed in destroying the electrical grid. As the looting subsumed the country in the initial aftermath of the war, they were intentionally ignorant about how to respond to the looters. Except the ministry of Oil, this was afforded every protection amidst the madness. Bremer knew Iraq would be exposed if the concerns his Iraqi counterparts were not addressed yet he was not fazed by their decrees. The American public has since deciphered the Neo-con validation for the war. To the public’s credit they have voiced their disapproval. Nonetheless, when it comes down to active dialogue for Filkins only those who have served in Iraq and their families seem willing or able to constructively talk about the war . Filkins *Forever War* set out to force readers to go beyond merely saying you disapprove of America’s military occupations in the middle east. As America’s deficit has grown exponentially it has become a relatively easy stance to say one disapproves of the war due to fiscal implications. Filkins wrote a book that demands much more than a passive opposition. The reader is forced to confront Iraqi mothers having their sons kidnapped in the middle of the night simply because of conflicting religious sects. The reader must to grips with the fact that Iraqi civilians have been killed and maimed by American bombs. The reader must accept that bounties are put on the heads of peaceful Iraqis with great regularity. Since America’s occupation life has become cheaper in Iraq than ever before. There is little reverence for the sanctity of human life in Iraq. Filkins testimonies are indicative of the crippling fear Iraqis are forced to overcome. His experiences do help reaffirm that the American public should be weary of this suspect occupation. Though his account’s main appeal is showing how limited public awareness truly is. As the occupation lingers coverage of Iraq remains but Americans in general are immune to what the occupation truly represents. A military occupation has become an absolute debacle and regardless of when troops eventually are withdrawn history will not absolve America. ‘Uncle Sam”, preempted war with fallacies, then allowed Iraq to implode. Filkins acknowledged several times that he should not have made it out of Iraq alive. He was forced to confront the ongoing obscenity. A majority of Americans may no longer support the war, but they do not have an adequate conceptualization of the toll it has been taking since 2003. American and Iraqi families cannot regain their slain loved ones. The question remains will America retain its dignity?

1. http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2006/mar/09/the-mess/?pagination=false [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\_east/4268904.stm [↑](#footnote-ref-2)