

If Pigs Could Fly

The day after Christmas 2006, the U.S.-military death toll in Iraq overtook and then surpassed the total number of Americans killed on September 11, 2001. Some Democrats, even before the symbolic number was reached, were calling for a withdrawal, either immediate or gradual, of U.S. forces. President Bush, although he had abandoned his signature tune "Stay the Course" for p.r. reasons, responded to criticism by promising a troop "surge," a metaphor apparently drawn from the hurricanes his administration responded to as effectively as it has waged war in Iraq. Having committed an additional 21,500 troops to the effort, the President continues to insist that, while we are facing "difficult choices and additional sacrifices," victory is, nonetheless, "achievable." What a long way we have come from the bold statements that accompanied his administration's buildup, throughout 2002, to the invasion of Iraq. In those exuberant days, President Bush and Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld sounded like Stuart Tarleton at the Wilkes' barbecue. The South could lick the Yankees in a month! "Gentlemen always fight better than rabble. A month—why, one battle—"

Throughout 2002, the President and his advisors insisted that they had not made up their minds to go to war, and some Republicans pretended to believe them. Most of us at *Chronicles* put as much stock in the denials as we put in the tales of Saddam's nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons. It seemed perfectly clear that, whatever Saddam did or did not do and no matter what Chirac or Putin said, the President of the United States was going to invade Iraq. We symbolized our conclusion with the cover of the March 2003 issue: an illustrated map of ancient Mesopotamia, with crosshairs lined up on Baghdad. The title was simply "Iraq."

The issue was published in mid-February and, within a month, the bombs were dropping on Baghdad. Although there had been much discussion (and even more duplicity) about the Bush administration's intentions, we had concluded, back in the autumn of 2002, that March was the likeliest time for the invasion. George W. Bush's foreign-policy advisors had been planning since even before the election of November 2000. Some of our sources had suggested a much earlier date; others had revealed that Karl Rove was arguing for postponing the operation to avoid the mistake that cost George H.W. Bush his reelection: The victory had come too early, and, by Election Day, people were no longer dazzled by the news that the world's only superpower had defeated a Third World nation.

It was at a rare meeting of contributing editors that one of our colleagues made a convincing case for March. As it turned out, he not only thought the invasion was necessary but even resigned from the editorial board because of our foolish belief that Saddam did not have a vast arsenal of "weapons of mass destruction," that an invasion was as unwise as it was unjust, and that no crusade to build democracy in the Middle East could possibly succeed. He was very polite at the time and has con-

tinued to write for us, but I am still waiting for the letter saying: "I'm sorry, but you were right, and I was wrong."

In looking back at that March 2003 issue, I am struck by how "on target" we were. Thomas Ryba laid out the necessary conditions for a just war and concluded that even on the basis of the Bush administration's *propaganda*—in retrospect, the word is eminently fair—the war would not be just. Srdja Trifkovic made the case that the war had little to do with WMDs and a good deal to do with the oil industry and the Israel lobby. Right again. Wayne Allensworth, in an article too honest and too careful to make headway against invincible ignorance, laid bare Moscow's motives for abandoning Iraq.

Perhaps the most unusual aspect to our collective argument was the emphasis on the lessons of history. Several short pieces reminded our readers of such precedents as the Crusades and the War Between the States, and Michael Stenton provided a remarkably lucid account of the modern Iraqi state and the dangerous game played by Britain and soon to be imitated by the United States. His conclusion, on the prospects of imposing democratic capitalism on Iraq, is worth quoting:

Iraqis are the best-educated people in the region: If any Arab economy can succeed, theirs can. Implicit in an American protectorate, however, would be a gamble on an economic transformation so steep and radical that it would remake society. Once in Baghdad, only excess can succeed.

The chances of failure are more obvious than the prospect of success. The attempt, however, can run and run. As the British found, power in Jerusalem, Baghdad, and Cairo, and access to all of the oil, is a great lure. Since there is almost certainly no existing grand project, the empty minds will fill with something. At the heart of imperialism, new or old, is the dangerous partnership of cynicism and imagination.

Some readers and not a few colleagues were perplexed by my decision to draw some lessons from the history of ancient Mesopotamia. My decision was partly the not-entirely-accidental result of working on a similar article for our book on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, but I was also immersed in revising a set of lectures on ancient history. In studying the "Fertile Crescent," I had come to two quite obvious conclusions about the region: first, that "Mesopotamia was the graveyard of empires," and that any great power foolish enough to involve itself had to be willing to shed more blood, American and Arab, than Americans could ever stomach; second, that "no one should have any il-



lusions—after 5,000 years—about bringing peace and democracy to Babylonia and Assyria. Our grandchildren will not live to see that day . . .”

In reflecting on ancient history, I pointed out that some of the conflicts—for example, that between Iraq and Iran—go back thousands of years, while others originated in the Islamic subjugation of the Christian Middle East, and still others were engendered by Ottoman oppression and the intervention of Western powers. The basic point, expanded and adumbrated in the succeeding three years, was that historical antagonisms would rule out any purely military solution and make even a political-economic solution (massive aid, rebuilding of infrastructure, establishment of a stable puppet regime) a very difficult proposition.

Don Rumsfeld is anything but stupid, but I was never foolish enough to believe that we could have changed his mind if only he would listen to us for a day, a week, a month, a year. Like most Americans, he is ignorant of history and impatient with any evidence or argument that stands between him and the accomplishment of his goals. If he knows any ancient history, it would be the propaganda spooned out by Edith Hamilton and the Durants. Our leaders hate history, because it tells them that our empire, as much as any other, is bound by laws we refuse to recognize.

Three years ago, we were arguing that, right or wrong, the Bush administration did not have a ghost of a chance of ruling Iraq. When the invasion was finally launched according to schedule, I was frequently invited to appear on local television and radio shows. When asked what our next move should be, I always said the same thing, no matter what the event we were discussing: the fall of Baghdad, the capture of Saddam Hussein, the staged elections. Declare victory and get out. But what about achieving real victory? I could only answer with Pilate: “What is victory?” That is the question to ask President Bush today, when he is still claiming that victory is within our reach, but it was also the question that Congress should have been asking in early 2003.

Here at *Chronicles*, it was Michael Stenton, wised up by Britain’s failures in the Middle East, who realized even before the invasion that we had no “existing grand project,” only political nonsense concocted to fill the strategic void. First, we were told the fable of WMDs, which few of our editors believed for even a moment. When the propaganda moved away from Iraq as a threat to our (or, rather, Israel’s) security to Iraq as an opportunity to build a democratic-capitalist showplace in the Islamic world, I was not alone in understanding what this meant. Our leaders and their advisors not only did not have a plan for victory, much less an exit strategy: They have never taken the trouble to define what victory might mean.

Victory over an enemy can take many forms. At the lowest level, the repulse of an invader—by force of arms or by bribes—is a victory. But, if the enemy is an enduring threat, something more than a mere defeat in the field might be required. Some enemies have to be thrashed so vigorously they will forego aggression for at least a generation. For tougher customers—or more attractive targets—nothing less than occupation and annexation will do. Taking a page or two out of Roman history, it is easy to see why the Romans decided to finish off Carthage and why they annexed the Macedonian kingdoms. Caesar’s exploits in Gaul and Britain are harder to understand, except as means to making Caesar the dictator he became. Eventually, Gaul proved to be a valuable addition to the empire, but what

was the point to the adventures of Varus, Drusus, and Germanicus across the Rhine? Not much, apparently, since Augustus and Tiberius squelched them.

In her wars, the United States has a mixed record. It is easy to justify our entrance into World War II as a necessity: No matter how culpable FDR might have been, we were, after all, attacked. In Korea, we were trying to contain the spread of an enemy ideology. The Mexican War is more complex: Both sides were provocative, and Mexico’s corrupt political system made the American land grab almost inevitable. The acquisition of so much territory, whether as the fruits of victory or the big steal, was an unquestionable advantage to the American people.

The last time we had a president from Texas, he lost a war and spent the nation close to bankruptcy, but Lyndon Baines Johnson was a frugal pacifist compared with his spiritual descendant, Lyndon Baines Bush, thanks to whom Americans can look forward to another decade of national humiliation and diminishing economic expectations. Being Americans, we shall sulk and neglect our legitimate defense interests as we let the Muslims terrorize Christians around the globe.

Other wars are murkier. We had no business in the Philippines, where we slaughtered hundreds of thousands of civilians and gained little advantage. The Vietnam War, if we had fought to win, might have been a success, but we had not taken the trouble to define victory. Instead of defending our pro-Western Christian ally, President Diem, we backed the Buddhists, and, instead of taking the gloves off and pounding North Vietnam into submission, we allowed Robert McNamara to play war games that cost us the lives of more than 58,000 men and damaged our prestige for over a decade.

The only lesson Donald Rumsfeld learned from Vietnam was that McNamara had been insufficiently ruthless. As a technocrat, he could never understand that it is dangerous to entrust the management of a war to arrogant technocrats who have no combat experience. McNamara had been a whiz at analyzing U.S. bombing campaigns in World War II, and, when he applied his “science” in Vietnam, he ensured our defeat. Rumsfeld’s obsession with military technology and his consequent neglect of the house-to-house reality of the fighting in Iraq doomed

our campaign to failure.

Although quite different men in so many ways, McNamara and Rumsfeld share one great weakness: a contempt for the human factor. Their blindness is something more than mere weakness. The grand illusion of our time is that moral problems—drunkenness, lechery, gluttony, violence—can be solved by technical means. To cure a vice, all that is needed is a 12-step program, and, for more widespread problems such as poverty, famine, and war, we need scientifically designed campaigns. It is easy to forget, sitting in the office of the secretary of defense, Forrest's great dictum that "war means fighting, and fighting means killing." Short of wholesale extermination, there is no technical solution to suicide bombers in Baghdad.

The kindest judgment on the thinking that produced the debacle in Iraq is that it was Quixotic, that the President and his advisors shared the impossible dream of remaking the Arab world in the American image. They did not pause to ask themselves why, if the people of Iraq wanted democratic self-government, they had saddled themselves with tyranny for 5,000 years. It was, to put it in the suitable language of nursery rhymes, a policy of "ifs and ans." If *ifs* and *ans* were pots and pans, there'd be no work for tinkers, and, if elections and constitutions produced peaceful democracies, there'd be no work for soldiers. But, to borrow another bit from Mother Goose, if Iraqi pigs could fly, they'd be dropping bombs on American soldiers. It is time for our foreign-policy planners to abandon the nursery and face the real world.

If we had given up the impossible dream of converting Iraq into an oil-rich Switzerland, what might victory have meant? George Bush Senior was content to humiliate Saddam's army and to keep his country weak and poor. Presumably, George

Bush Junior's neoconservative advisors were hoping for a quasidemocratic Jordan or Turkey, states that find profit in their alliance with the United States and in their cooperative relations with Israel. Something like that might have been possible in the early days, when many Iraqis were grateful for the overthrow of Saddam's government. Now, they all hate our guts, including Iraqi politicians whose very survival depends on the U.S.-military presence. We have taught not just Muslims but the entire world that we are a dangerous and reckless country, and the evil presidents of Iran and North Korea are not the only leaders who have concluded that national survival lies in the development of a nuclear arsenal.

The last time we had a president from Texas, he lost a war and spent the nation close to bankruptcy, but Lyndon Baines Johnson was a frugal pacifist compared with his spiritual descendant, Lyndon Baines Bush, thanks to whom Americans can look forward to another decade of national humiliation and diminishing economic expectations. Being Americans, we shall sulk and neglect our legitimate defense interests as we let the Muslims terrorize Christians around the globe and the Chinese take over what is left of our manufacturing. As we sink, we shall devote more and more of our resources to socialized medicine and socialized schooling. Only the worst of our youth will join the Armed Forces, and most young men will only turn violent if someone buys the last PlayStation 7 from Wal-Mart.

Given the size of our consumer economy, we shall begin to recover sometime in the teens, though it will take roughly a generation—30 years—for us to forget how stupid we were at the start of the millennium. By 2030, we should be ready to go toe-to-toe with China or Russia or Europe—or perhaps all three. ©

Black Sea Sketches

BLACK SEA SKETCHES is a travel book written for serious travelers, including armchair travelers. Although the author may take an occasional swim or walk the beaches, the book is much more about the history and prehistory, the culture and the contemporary scene than about recreational opportunities. It is the kind of book you would want to read before or during your own travel in these fascinating countries.

The five countries—Ukraine, Rumania, Bulgaria, Turkey, and Georgia—often share military and economic history, but cultural contrasts abound: different alphabets and languages, different religions. While most of Ukraine, Rumania, Bulgaria, and Georgia embrace the Orthodox faith, Turkey is largely Muslim, as is part of the Crimean population. All five of the countries reflect, especially architecturally, the common past of ancient Greece and, most of them, of the later Genoan commercial empire.

Black Sea Sketches



William Mills

Rising above the glittering monuments of the past, however, are the people Mills met and the stories of their lives, often of great courage under pressure and of generosity to a stranger and a traveler.

Comments about other works of William Mills

"William Mills' stories draw the reader deeply into the hearts and minds of men and women to reveal the essential nature of Man in a world governed by forces so primal there is no resisting their call, no mitigation of their judgment."

—Gordon Weaver

"Seldom have I found a contemporary poet so intensely and humanly convincing. Mills' voice is very near the fraternal and memorable sounds we all want to make, and say."

—James Dickey

Chronicles
A JOURNAL OF AMERICAN CULTURE

- send check or money order to 928 N. Main Street, Rockford, IL 61103
- call (800) 383-0680 to order with MasterCard, Visa, Amex. Discover
- purchase online at the webstore on ChroniclesMagazine.org

Paperback Price \$19.95
(\$16.95 + \$3.00 shipping and handling)

Hitchcock Without Stars

Alfred Hitchcock now enjoys a high and even, some would say, an exaggerated reputation among Hollywood film directors. Certainly, he is among the most influential, if only because with *Psycho* (1960) he created the mother, as it were, of all slasher movies. One reviewer, wishing to hint at the film's theme without revealing the ending, remarked: "Suffice it to say that mother love has received a blow from which that sentiment may not recover."

No other film in the genre is likely to match *Psycho*'s most shocking innovation: killing off the star early in the story. The gruesomeness of the famous shower scene was hardly more unsettling than this macabre trick on the audience's expectations, far beyond anything else Hitchcock ever did, before or after.

Hitchcock once remarked to an interviewer that, when you make a movie with a big star, the audience can count on one thing: That star's character is going to live to the end of the story. No matter how much danger he's in, Cary Grant or Jimmy Stewart can't die. The star system almost mandates happy endings.

Hitchcock's nature, especially his dark humor, chafed at this rule. He'd had to change the ending of *Suspicion* (1941), quite implausibly, because he had planned to have Grant murdering his wife, Joan Fontaine. Grant or the studio (accounts differ) refused to permit this. The director ventured one dark ending in *Vertigo* (1958), when Jimmy Stewart watched Kim Novak fall to her death. The movie flopped.

Hitchcock returned to form, or formula, in 1959 with Grant in *North by Northwest*, a frothy thriller and sensational hit—just what audiences (and studios) wanted. Now he was in a position to make the kind of film he really wanted to make, his revenge on the star system. It all but ended Janet Leigh's career.

Some of Hitchcock's most interesting films dispense with stardom and glamour. You sense that they are closer to his heart than most of the famous ones. In *I Confess* (1953), Montgomery Clift plays a priest who hears a murderer's confession and then is accused of the crime himself. Shot in black and white and set in Mon-

teal, the story is more a study of the tormented priest than a suspense film. It belies Hitchcock's supposed contempt for actors: Clift is like a raw wound, and the director respects his talent so much that, for once, he seems to let the actor dominate the picture (though he later grumbled about Clift's "method" acting). Of all Hitchcock's mature films, *I Confess* may be the least obviously "Hitchcockian," even though its theme of a wrongly accused innocent man is very typical.

A 1956 film, *The Wrong Man*, is also, as its title makes clear enough, about the same problem, but again, it's far from formulaic. Based on a true story of false arrest for armed robbery, its style is almost documentary, and, once more, Hitchcock uses gritty black and white. The year before, he'd done another sumptuous thriller, *To Catch a Thief*, with Grant and Grace Kelly. This time, the stars, Henry Fonda and Vera Miles as his wife, play a couple of drab New York tenement dwellers, with Miles sinking into serious depression.

Hitchcock had high hopes for Miles, a beauty and a fine actress, and wanted her to star in *Vertigo*. But her pregnancy prevented this, though he used her again later as Janet Leigh's sister in *Psycho*. Like Clift, she should have had a brilliant career.

Topaz (1969), an almost epic story of espionage surrounding the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, is another anomaly, a movie with no single protagonist and no big names except the director's. The plot is complex, the characters many; but the large cast is excellent, and John Vernon is a memorable villain. The film was a popular and critical failure, but I have always enjoyed it for its spectacle, episodic suspense, and—an oddity in a Hitchcock picture—emotional warmth; one of its subplots is a moving love story that ends tragically. Hitchcock is usually apolitical; but the tone of *Topaz* is uncompromisingly anticommunist, a rather startling fact given that the film was made in the middle of the unpopular Vietnam War.

No doubt the appeal of *Topaz* was hurt by the absence of a star, but the richness of the other elements more than makes up for this. In fact, it shows what Hitch-



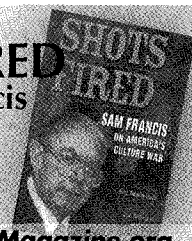
cock could do without the box-office allure of celebrity. In its own way, it adds luster to his achievement. Despite the huge bag of tricks available to the old master, near the end of his career, he was still attempting something new.

Hitchcock's last hit film was *Frenzy* (1972). The cast was mostly unknown; Jon Finch is suspected of the rape-murders of his ex-wife and several other women in London, and Hitchcock makes him so surly that he doesn't enjoy the automatic audience sympathy the *Wrong Man* usually receives. The real killer (Barry Foster) is the charmer here, while the film abounds in disagreeable minor characters. One of the victims is Finch's girlfriend (Anna Massey); Finch is convicted of the crime; and, in contrast to many of Hitchcock's thrillers, the audience has no assurance that justice will finally triumph.

Like *Topaz*, *Frenzy* is often gorgeous to behold. It's also full (as *Topaz* isn't) of Hitchcock's mordant humor.

Hitchcock's films often featured glamorous stars: Grant (four times), Stewart (four times), Kelly (thrice), Gregory Peck (twice), Ingrid Bergman (twice), Laurence Olivier, Sean Connery, Paul Newman, Julie Andrews. But he wasn't always happy with them; and he did some of his most interesting films without them, when he could be free of the necessities they imposed. Has any other director known so many different ways to make unforgettable movies?

Purchase
SHOTS FIRED
by Samuel Francis
for \$23.95



www.ChroniclesMagazine.org