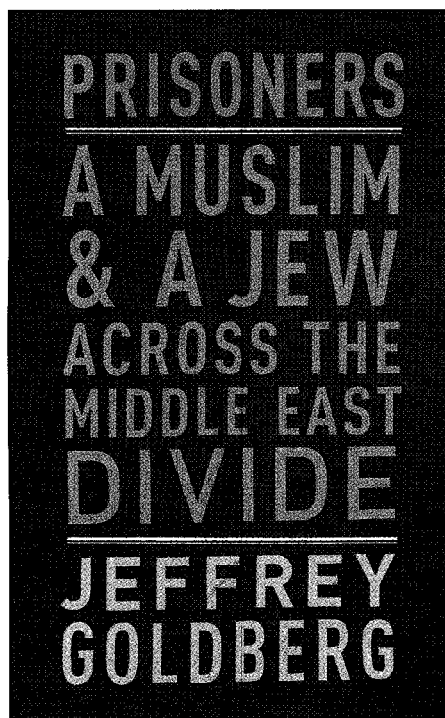


Stuck in the Middle East With You

Lessons from an improbable friendship.

By Joshua Hammer



Prisoners

By Jeffrey Goldberg
\$25, Knopf

In 1990, near the end of the first Palestinian *intifada*, Jeffrey Goldberg, a young American Jew living in Israel and contemplating immigrating there, was dispatched on army reserve duty to serve as a guard in Ketziot, a bleak prison camp in the Negev Desert. For Goldberg, who had grown up admiring the early Zionist pioneers and the warriors of the Jewish state, being a *shoter* (policeman) provided a lesson in the moral ambiguities of Israel-as-occupier. In one memorable episode, he finds himself facing a seething pack of Palestinian inmates on the verge of a riot after guards shot a prisoner who had attacked them. His face covered by a gas mask, carrying a truncheon, Goldberg contemplates the ironies of his transformation. "All my life I wanted to be a Freedom Rider," he writes. "Now I felt like Bull Connor."

Goldberg's prison experience and the friendship he managed to forge across the barbed wire with one of the inmates, a Fatah activist and mathematics whiz from Gaza named Rafiq Hijazi, form the foundation of his brilliant new book, *Prisoners: A Muslim and a Jew Across the Middle East Divide*. The book is, on one level, an intensely personal coming-of-age story, tracing Goldberg's progress from secular Jewish student in New York to Israeli soldier to war correspondent. But it is also perhaps the best on-the-ground portrait since

Thomas Friedman's *From Beirut to Jerusalem* of the hatreds, passions, and illusions gripping the contemporary Middle East. Goldberg's journey through Afghanistan, Pakistan, Egypt, Gaza, and Israel during the period immediately before and after 9/11 provides disturbing insights into the abyss separating Arab and Jew, East and West—if not a clash of civilizations, Goldberg suggests, than a perhaps unbridgeable gulf of empathy and understanding.

Goldberg grew up in an affluent suburb on the south shore of Long Island; his parents were Jewish liberals whose religious exposure began and ended with occasional visits to the local Reform temple, "a sterile place of yellow hallways, organ music, women in furs, and *garmentos* talking through Shabbat services." He found his way to Zionism at an early age; while his high school and college classmates were rallying around cult figures like Leonard Peltier, the Native-American activist serving a life sentence for murder, Goldberg focused his idolization on Yonatan Netanyahu, the Israeli special-forces commander and older brother of the former prime minister, who died leading the raid to free hostages at Entebbe Airport in Uganda in 1976. His burgeoning Jewish identity led him first to a Socialist Zionist summer camp, then on a dangerous mission to aid refuseniks in the Brezhnev-era Soviet Union—where he was arrested and threatened by the KGB—and finally, in his early twenties, to Tel Aviv.

folks,” as he calls regular people, I’m your guy.

But if you want to join the fight and need to determine just what kind of person to hate, *Culture Warrior* can be maddeningly vague. First, many of O’Reilly’s causes barely exist outside the fevered minds of FOX News hosts; if you’d like to enlist in the resistance to the War on Christmas, there isn’t much to do unless you want to throw rocks through store windows with “Happy Holidays” signs. (For the unfamiliar, the phrase “Happy Holidays” is, according to O’Reilly, deeply offensive to Christians and represents an assault on our heritage.) Furthermore, O’Reilly’s caricature of his opponents’ beliefs is so ridiculous and hyperbolic that it puts him in an awkward position. If there is no one of any importance who actually advocates capping Americans’ net worth at \$15 million or banning religious expression in the public square (both of which he claims to be part of the secular-progressive agenda), it would seem to be difficult to tar any particular individual with that brush.

So, though O’Reilly’s list of offenders is long, for many, he never specifies just what makes them part of the “S-P crowd,” other than crossing swords with Bill O’Reilly. Nancy Pelosi criticized O’Reilly for his on-air comment inviting al Qaeda to attack San Francisco, so she has “S-P fever.” About Alec Baldwin, he says, “the actor is primarily interested in politics, but there is always that progressive crossover: because he is a liberal Democrat, the S-P forces support his philosophy.” George Clooney is “more of a far-left ideologue than an enlisted S-P culture warrior.” What this all means is left unsaid. Even someone like columnist Jimmy Breslin is part of the conspiracy. (When Breslin criticized his last book, *The O’Reilly Factor for Kids*, O’Reilly says, he wrote Breslin a note that read, “you have tried to hurt a project that could help many children. Hope you feel good about that.” The succor the nation’s youth derived from *The O’Reilly Factor for Kids* is hard to measure, but it seems unlikely that Breslin’s criticism set back the little ones too much.)

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O’Reilly alternately portrays himself as hero and martyr, the nation’s savior and a lonely, principled voice with the weight of the world on his sturdy but tired shoulders. “There is no shortage of people trying to marginalize me, or worse, destroy me,” he tells us. “My family has also been threatened and I’ve had to change every aspect of my life. No longer can I behave as a ‘regular guy’ and go out and cut loose with my friends. No longer can I even engage a stranger in conversation—there are too many crazies out there. At work, every call I receive is monitored and every interaction I have has to be witnessed. I am never off the job and am always on guard. Would you want to live that way?”

Lashing himself to the rack with the enthusiasm of Mel Gibson, O’Reilly predicts the firestorm that his book will bring about. “The S-P power brokers will be seething, and I guarantee they will command their forces to attack me in every way possible. As in the past, personal smears will rule the day and I will be defamed from all secular directions.” Because of his fight, he writes, “I’ve paid the price, and so have those around me, because the amount of hatred directed my way is staggering.”

Yet if he is overcome by these sinister forces, we will know all the good he did. “Think about what America would be like now if we [FOX News and “The O’Reilly Factor”] had not arrived on the scene and provided Americans with an alternative to the strongly S-P established media,” he writes near the book’s end.

But ultimately, this man of courage isn’t too eager to engage his opponents.

He says many times that actually arguing with them is pointless, because it’s “virtually impossible to have a reasonable conversation with an S-P fanatic.” And he admits he won’t allow “the S-Ps” on his show, because “it is hard to imagine a more loathsome group.”

The blurb on *Culture Warrior*’s cover, from gossip columnist Liz Smith, is a creepy testament to how O’Reilly would like to be seen. “[Bill O’Reilly’s] aura of command is fascinating,” she says. “I left Mr. O’Reilly’s super-hot domain trying to think of whom he reminded me. It came to me: Gen. George S. Patton, complete with ivory-handled revolvers on his hips, couldn’t exude more confidence, certainty, and know-how than Bill O’Reilly.” With Bill O’Reilly, it’s all about the exuding.

O’Reilly is nothing if not a self-promoter, and as he did with his previous books, he has been hawking *Culture Warrior* relentlessly on his television and radio shows. No doubt many of his loyal fans will follow instructions and get their hands on a copy, and it will become, in the term its book jacket uses to describe O’Reilly’s previous books, a “mega-bestseller.” As FOX News recently conceded, the median age of O’Reilly’s viewers is 71. Imagine three million grumpy old men shaking their fists at the television screen, a copy of *Culture Warrior* in hand, shouting, “You said it, Bill! Give ‘em hell!”

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easy, referring to MMFA only as “vile”). I’ve also been on O’Reilly’s show a number of times (though not since I joined *Media Matters*—the man who calls people who won’t appear on his show “cowards” refuses to allow anyone from MMFA on).

But being on the receiving end of O’Reilly’s sneers and insults isn’t the trial it might seem. In fact, there are really only two conclusions one can make about Bill O’Reilly. Either he’s a paranoid, self-deluded bully, brimming with resentment, insecure about his manhood, and consumed by hatred. Or it’s all an act.

The truth is that “Bill O’Reilly” is a character that Bill O’Reilly plays on TV, an archetype of Average Joe outrage and two-fisted pugnaciousness. There’s a reason Stephen Colbert modeled his own character—“a well-intentioned, poorly informed, high-status idiot”—on the man he calls “Papa Bear.” But where Colbert goes for laughs, O’Reilly tries to convince his viewers that he feels their pain.

You can see it in the lengths *Culture Warrior* goes to match O’Reilly’s conversational tone, a blue-collar vernacular meant to signal that the author is just a regular guy. On the air, O’Reilly is alone among television broadcasters in talking this way, and it is to his credit that he understands how powerful it can be in maintaining the persona he worked so hard to construct. But in print, the effect is so transparently affected it becomes almost laughable. “Oh, and one more thing,” O’Reilly will write. “Too harsh? No way.” “Am I wrong here?” “I mean, come on.” “So there.”

Bill O’Reilly desperately wants you to believe he’s just like you. To get a sense of how important his blue-collar cred is, consider the unsettled issue of exactly where O’Reilly grew up. In December 2000, a *Washington Post* story quoted O’Reilly’s mother saying that though Bill says he grew up in Levittown, N.Y.; in fact, the family lived in Westbury, a somewhat more affluent town a few miles away. The same *Post* article noted that although O’Reilly trumpets the fact that his father never

made more than \$35,000, he retired in 1978. That works out to just over \$100,000 in today’s dollars—not enough to make the O’Reillys stinking rich, but not paltry enough to send them to the poorhouse, either.

The point is that this issue—because it bears so directly on O’Reilly’s persona as someone who pulled himself up from nothing by his own bootstraps—is one he feels very strongly about. In *Culture Warrior*, he goes so far as to reproduce the deed to his parents’ house, with the words “Levittown, NY” printed in the corner. In case you haven’t gotten the point, O’Reilly writes, “You are reading the words of the poster boy for U-M [upward mobility], by the way.” (The habit of turning ordinary phrases into

their initials runs throughout the book. Fewer than 20 pages from the end, he stops saying “traditional culture warrior” and starts saying “T-Warrior.” When she interviewed him on “20/20,” Barbara Walters said, “You call yourself ‘T-Warrior.’ I’m gonna call you T from now on. Okay, T?” She then began her next question with, “So listen, T...” There is little indication that she was making fun of him.)

All of this is a way of forging connections between O’Reilly and his audience. His message is, I’m one of you. When you get ticked off, I get ticked off. When it seems like there are powerful forces out there that are keeping you down, I feel it, too, and I’ll fight them on your behalf. If you’re one of “the



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