

# Reviews

## The Neocons: Seymour's Antidote

**Seymour M. Hersh, *Chain of Command*, Penguin, 432 pages, 2005, paperback ISBN 0141020881, £7.99**

Seymour Hersh has been for some years providing in *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker* and elsewhere the inside story of the takeover of the Bush administration, US military and intelligence services by a group of neoconservatives, Vice President Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Perle and John Bolton in particular. One of the most important results of this takeover, as Hersh has revealed it, is how through a top secret Presidential order called the 'Special-Access Programme' (SAP), the Defence Department was authorised to recruit a clandestine team of special forces operatives to carry out a 'manhunt' for al Qaeda all over the world and outside of international law. What we have learnt of the obscenities at Guantánamo Bay and at Abu Graibh prison in Iraq have not been the result of a few individuals acting on their own initiative, but part of a 'chain of command' going back to the very top. Yet, while eight enlisted men and women have been charged, no officer or higher authority is facing criminal proceedings for the treatment of prisoners. The very man who had been in command of Guantánamo, Major General Geoffrey Miller, was sent to take charge of Abu Graibh.

Hersh starts by dealing with the ambiguity over the definition of torture, which has led US officials, including Condoleezza Rice, to deny all accusations that the US authorities were condoning the use of torture. Rice's words on the subject are interesting: 'The Administration can't overthrow the whole detention and interrogation facility.' Hersh's most important point is that all the interrogations and use of special forces have dismally failed to produce any crucial intelligence, just as all the US intelligence systems failed to reveal that Saddam Hussein had no weapons of mass destruction, or to anticipate the bombings of 9/11, in spite of warnings from other countries' intelligence services. What emerges from Hersh's revelations is the quite extraordinary degree of rivalry and non-cooperation between the different branches of the US military and civilian intelligence.

On the results of the war in Afghanistan, Hersh quotes Hy Rothstein, a retired army colonel who was charged by the Defence Department's Office of Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict to examine the planning and execution of the war. 'The conditions under which the post-Taliban government came to power gave [in Rothstein's words] "warlordism, banditry and opium production a new lease on life".' Opium production, which had fallen to 185 metric tons in a year under the Taliban, had, according to a UN report of 2003, soared to 3,600 tons. On the position of women, Judy Benjamin, who was the gender adviser to the US Agency for International Development, is quoted by Hersh telling him, 'The legal opportunities have improved but the day to day life for women, even in Kabul, isn't any better.'

Hersh's revelations about the decision of what he calls the 'Iraq hawks' to go to war in Iraq some time before 2003 are now well known, but he is able to quote a former US National Security Council staff member saying, 'As of February 2002, the decision to go to war was taken'. One of the leading hawks, Richard Perle, his role as chairman of the Defence Policy Board and the conflict with his interest in arms and oil in Saudi Arabia, are fully examined by Hersh who concludes, 'There is no question that Perle believed that removing Saddam from power was the right thing to do. At the same time, he set up a company that stood to gain from a war ...' Ahmad Chalabi's role as leader of the Iraqi National Congress and the US nominee for the premiership after the war is described in detail by Hersh, with all the evidence that Chalabi was responsible for feeding the Americans with stories of Saddam's supposed weapons of mass destruction and of a supposed likely uprising in Iraq in support of a US liberating force.

The role of the special forces of the US Defence Department was much enhanced once the invasion of Iraq had begun. This was all part of Rumsfeld's faith in a small military ground force supported heavily from the air (secret forces which would also not be counted in the total). The one-time Ba'athist leadership under Saddam was to be eliminated by 'preemptive manhunting' starting with Saddam himself and the top 50 members of the leadership, some to be held for interrogation, others apparently to be assassinated. Lt.General William G. Boykin was brought back from retirement by Rumsfeld to plan the manhunt offensive. Boykin was reported by *The Los Angeles Times* to have spoken to US church groups 'repeatedly equating the Muslim world with Satan.' Hersh points out that the manhunt created a body of 'tens of thousands of unemployed former military officers and enlistees ... who plot, plan ... and at night go out on their missions', their motivation being nationalist and their target the US 'occupation', as they saw it. Far from fighting terrorism in Iraq, the Americans have in fact been generating it among the Iraqis with a modicum of help from al Qaeda.

A penultimate chapter is devoted by Hersh to General Pervez Musharraf, the President of Pakistan, whom Hersh describes as a 'most dangerous friend' of the US President. The duplicity of Musharraf arises from the strength of Muslim fanaticism in Pakistan, but also from the power of the Inter-Services Intelligence in Pakistan, which ran the Taliban in Afghanistan and managed the technology transfers of Pakistan's nuclear armoury. What is happening in Iraq naturally has repercussions throughout the Middle East, and this is what Hersh devotes his last chapter to explaining. 'Terrorism, instead of democracy,' he writes, 'is now spreading throughout the region.' It is a disturbing list. Syria, he believes, could have been won for American interests but was included by Bush in the 'Axis of Evil.' 'The Israelis are disaffected and seeking a risky new partnership with Kurdistan'. The Turks can tolerate this so long as Iraq remains intact. Prominent Saudis give money to Bin Laden. The Halliburton corporation, previously headed by Vice-President Dick Cheney, operates a number of subsidiaries in Saudi Arabia, and has established a dominant presence in Iraq. But the oil pipes in Iraq are being blown up. Water and petrol are in short supply in Iraqi cities and

electricity supply is intermittent. In an Afterword written in March of 2005, Hersh writes that he does not expect an early improvement in the situation in Iraq, nor any recovery of George W. Bush from the unpopularity which now marks his Presidency.

*Michael Barratt Brown*

## **Robert Fisk Defending Civilisation**

**Robert Fisk, *The Great War for Civilisation: The Conquest of the Middle East*, Fourth Estate, 1,366 pages, hardback ISBN 1 84115 007 X, £25.00**

Those familiar with Robert Fisk's reportage in *The Independent* will not be surprised by the passion of this book and its commitment to the truth as observed first hand. In an age of the 'embedded' and 'hotel' journalist, reporting from the Arab street is not for the faint-hearted, and the content of his work testifies to his own bravery and ability. The 29 media personnel killed in Iraq alone in 2005 testify to the hazards of the occupation. The skills honed through his living and reporting in the area for nearly 30 years have given him the necessary qualities for accurately assessing and describing the forces at work in the Middle East. He has eschewed the normal shifts of location which are usual for the foreign correspondent and the attendant clambering up the greasy pole of perceived journalistic success.

The book is a long (1,283 pages without the references!), discursive mixture of the history of the Middle East since 'The Great War', and the related colonial powers' dispensations for the area, coupled with more recent reportage from the region. We start with Fisk's meetings with bin Laden: firstly in 1993 in Sudan and then in 1997 in his Afghan mountain fastness round the campfire where the leader of 'world terrorism' attempts to recruit the author as a follower – a difficult situation for our intrepid journalist, given the remoteness and potentially violent surroundings. He manages to decline the offer with remarkable adroitness and care. Bin Laden, at this time, was fixated with the corruption and servility of the Saudi rulers to the Americans and the consequent US troops stationed in the 'Land of the Prophet', which made him determined to 'turn the United States into a shadow of itself'. No surprises there then – but Fisk's vignette of the character of the 'leader of world terrorism' is the most objective and interesting that we are likely to get for the foreseeable future. The re-visiting of Afghanistan provokes a return to Fisk's earlier reporting of the Russian intervention as well as earlier British intrusions. The brutal and hopeless nature of these conflicts is described with all its portents for the later American invasion and occupation. Fisk holds all this together with linked historical and even family-related asides that are typical of the whole book. This style has been criticised by some on the grounds of its sprawling nature, but such asides are usually stimulating and at times poignant.

An interesting chapter on Iran covers the overthrow of the Mossadeq

government and the activities of both the British and American intelligence services, led respectively by 'Monty' Woodhouse and Kermit Roosevelt. The coup established American primacy in the Shah's Iran and consequently over its vast oil resources, with Britain coming a grateful second in ranking. The murderous Savak with its 60,000 operatives was to underpin the Shah's profligate and brutal rule until the 'Islamic Revolution' of 1979. Fisk has interviewed (sitting at the feet of) both Khomeini and Hojatoislam Khalkhi, the so-called 'hanging judge' of the new Islamic state, and the subsequent pages make chilling reading as Khalkhi cuts a swathe through not only remnants of the Shah's regime, but any murmurings of opposition, from schoolgirls to leaders of the Tudeh (communist) party. Conterminous with internal terror is the mass slaughter of the eight-year long Iran/Iraq war, a war which Fisk views from the frontline of both contending armies. And hair-raising reading it makes, too, with tales of Iranian child soldier martyrs and Iraqi poison gas attacks.

Fisk documents the connivance of the Western powers and the Soviet bloc in feeding the fires of war by supplying either Iran or Iraq (or both) with chemical, biological and conventional weapons. America's coaxing of Saddam's initial invasion of Iran and its supply of satellite information on Iranian frontline troop disbursements is also catalogued. Further American involvement is illustrated by the destruction of an Iranian passenger aircraft, on a regularly scheduled flight-path to Dubai, by ground-to-air missiles from the US warship *Vincennes*, demonstrating an abysmal lack of 'command and control' structures on the US ship. Fisk at the time thoroughly investigated and exposed this issue, but the story was distorted editorially by *The Times* and this episode is recalled in the book. This is a particularly good example of Fisk is at his most incisive, getting to the bottom of what actually happened, cutting his way through the deliberate obfuscation of military and political spokesmen and the inherent assumptions of an ever-cooperative media. It was the occasion for his final parting with the Murdoch-owned *Times*. One gets the feeling he relishes the investigative element of the correspondent's role, telling the truth, and where possible confronting those involved. He does this with the manufacturer of the US 'Hellfire' missiles, fired from an Israeli Apache attack helicopter at an ambulance in South Lebanon in 2000. The ambulance, clearly marked, was carrying women and children, many of whom were killed. The arms industry in general gets a whole chapter of condemnation and exposure for its record in intensifying and exacerbating Middle Eastern suffering. Additionally, the reporting of the on-going conflict in Israel and the occupied territories contains some of the most graphic descriptions of violence in the book. Grimly he brings the reality of the conflict, in all its brutality, sharply into focus, both Palestinian and Israeli, but never forgetting the inherent inequality of the struggle and the profound injustice and suffering perpetrated on the Palestinian people.

The chapters on Iraq reiterate a lot of what is already known about the brutality of the Saddam regime: the appalling treatment of the Kurds, Shia Muslims, Marsh Arabs and virtually any opposition, as well as the dreadful cost in Iraqi lives of the

Iran War, the Gulf War and the 2003 invasion and occupation. Fisk catalogues the cruelty of the pre-invasion sanctions policy and its dreadful consequences for the children of Iraq, as well as highlighting the terrible results of the use of depleted uranium in terms of cancers and birth defects. Once again here he is, at his campaigning, investigative best, exposing the cost of the wrong kind of Western intervention in the Middle East and its impact on the ordinary people of the area.

Many other matters are covered: the Armenian Genocide, the Kurds, the Algerian civil war, the betrayal of the Shiite US-provoked revolt at the conclusion of the first Gulf War, Sabra and Chatila, 9/11 and the second invasion of Iraq, the bombing of Afghanistan and much more. One constantly feels Fisk's urgency to get the alternative narrative into the public domain. His virtually monthly speaking tours of the United States, his appeals for medical funding for the sick depleted uranium affected children of Iraq in the columns of *The Independent*, and much else besides testify that this is a man in a hurry, driven by the clear moral imperative to confront the world with the suffering of Iraqis, Iranians, Palestinians, and all the affected peoples of the Middle East. This suffering is exacerbated (and often largely caused) by Western intervention and its accompanying thirst for oil. Therefore, in my opinion, Fisk must be forgiven for any criticism on the grounds of length and connectedness. He wanted to get it all on the record (using all 328,000 individual documents he has collected over the years) because it deserves to be on the record. This book is a very gruelling read and at times quite harrowing, but we all need to realise or re-confirm the consequences of what is time and again being done by our governments in our name.

*John Daniels*

## Shia Uprising

**Mark Etherington, *Revolt on the Tigris: The Al-Sadr Uprising and the Governing of Iraq*, C Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd, 252 pages, hardback ISBN 1850657734, £15**

This is an insider's view, which offers a rare insight into the mess which was left behind after the bombing and occupation of Iraq in 2003. Mark Etherington was a former paratrooper in the British Army, born and raised in the Middle East, who had post-conflict experience in Yugoslavia, and was sent by the British Foreign Office to establish a new administration in the southern province of Wasit on behalf of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) in preparation for Iraqi self-government. Etherington from the start disliked the 'quasi-colonial' status of an 'invasion force turned occupiers'. In particular, he questioned the responsibility of the military for overseeing the police and judiciary. He was not provided with a legal expert to review their working, and his American colleagues seemed to regard this as unnecessary; they had no doubts about their legal rights. Yet

Etherington's Balkan experience had taught him that without establishing the rule of law, civil reform is wellnigh impossible.

The absence of a recognised rule of law was not the only problem faced by his Coalition Provisional Authority unit. It was far too small to be effective in a province of nearly a million people, spread over a territory 120 km long by 110 km wide. Military security was supplied by a Ukrainian force which had rules of engagement of a peace-keeping and not a defensive nature. All other aspects of security and so-called 'life support', including local staff recruitment, were the responsibility of the contractors, Kellogg, Root and Brown, a company of the Halliburton group, of which Vice-President Dick Cheney had been chief executive.

Corruption was endemic, and this started from the highest levels of local government, such as it was, and worked downwards, via tribal, family and political party channels. Most serious of all, while Saddam's dictatorial regime had been replaced by a free for all, the infrastructure of the country – roads, bridges, electricity, water, sewerage and fuel supplies – had been destroyed by the bombing and not repaired. This, together with the disbanding of the army and the police, had left a mass of unemployed, widespread poverty, and profoundly disaffected young people.

This was the background to the uprising led by Moqtada al-Sadr in 2004, and the expulsion in a sixteen-hour fire-fight of Etherington and his CPA unit from their base in Kut. This was not an uprising of Sunnis and Ba'athists, one-time rulers of Saddam's Iraq, but of Shia. The Al-Sadr militia were only able to dominate the situation because of the universal anger at the failure of all public services – electricity, water, sewerage and fuel supplies – which had not failed under Saddam, and the universal lawlessness. 'You have conquered our country;' said one civil official to Etherington, 'it is your duty to protect us.' The province of Wasit lies to the east along the border with Iran and movement across the border is normally large-scale and continuous. Insurgents from Iran were often blamed by the Coalition for the uprising, but Etherington discounts this. Several of the border crossings had been closed and there were enough of the local population with arms from the disbanded forces to give al-Sadr his well-armed militia.

The reoccupation by American arms of Kut and the return of Etherington's unit were achieved by the employment of massive American fire-power. The death toll of al-Sadr's force has to be estimated in the thousands. Peace was re-established and new men installed in the local police force and civil government, but at the price of the retention of a continuous large-scale US military presence which has not prevented, has indeed probably encouraged, the suicide bombing of military targets.

While the whole infrastructure of the country remains unrepaired from the American bombing, it is hard to imagine from Etherington's description how any military withdrawal will occur. Tacitus' famous words about Roman rule apply: 'They make a wilderness and they call it peace.'

## Lack of Intelligence

**Crispin Black, 7-7 *The London Bombs: What Went Wrong?*, Gibson Square Books, 96 pages, paperback ISBN 1903933714, £5.95**

There has been remarkably little clarification of what the British authorities knew or didn't know in advance of the tube bombings and bus bombing in London on 7 July 2005. Charles Clarke protested at the time that nothing was known. Crispin Black records that both the French and Saudi authorities have claimed they knew in advance that attacks were planned. Indeed, the Saudis took some trouble in trying to alert the British authorities, but to no discernible effect, it seems. It was also said at the time that the Israelis had some prior notice, and that Benjamin Netanyahu, visiting London at the time, was warned to stay in his hotel next to Liverpool Street station, not far from the Aldgate bomb.

Certainly, Mr. Blair's Government has set its face against any public inquiry into these events. Nor has there been any convincing explanation as to why MI5's Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre (JTAC) – which 'analyses all intelligence relating to international terrorism, at home and overseas' and 'produces assessments of threats and other terrorist-related subjects' – lowered the official state of alert five weeks prior to the London bombings.

Crispin Black asks some pertinent questions, but offers little in the way of any substantial answer to that posed in his sub-title. A career in spookery (Cambridge, Sandhurst, Northern Ireland, Cabinet Office, and now 'independent intelligence analyst') leads Mr Black to urge the merger of international and domestic intelligence agencies in the United Kingdom, arguing that the distinction no longer corresponds to the reality of the work in which they are engaged. He goes on to describe the 'new strategic reality' in which British Muslims were 'prepared to kill their fellow countrymen in the cause of jihad'. Already, the consequences of that perception are keenly felt by Pakistani and other ethnic minority communities subject to increased surveillance, not to say harassment, by local police forces.

We always knew that the secret services were inimical to democracy. That they are also hugely incompetent should not, perhaps, come as any great surprise. They remain part of the problem, not part of the solution. For that we have to look to each other for some measure of mutual protection in this protracted period of gross political deceit and manipulation, when wars are seeded and prosecuted, and those who are responsible break international law apparently with impunity.

*Tony Simpson*