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Ponnuru on Palin and the Future of the Right

NATIONAL REVIEW

THE PERILS OF PAULSON

Bailouts to Nowhere

DONALD L. LUSKIN

**The Danger of
Directed Lending**

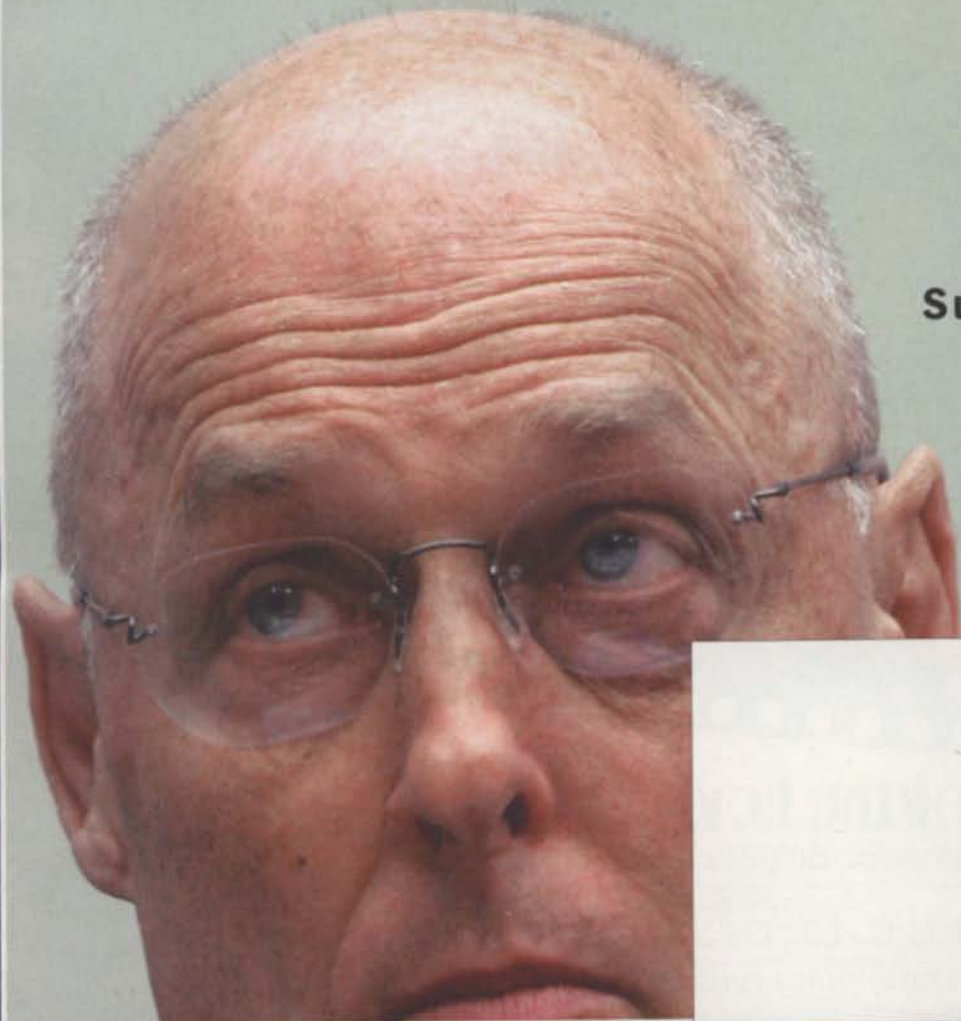
STUTTAFORD

**The Left's
Subprime Merchants**

MILLER

**Against the
Stimulus Bill**

SPRUIELL



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Death by Rescue

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This year's emergency sallies into the banking system by the Fed, the Treasury, the FDIC, and the SEC have backfired. They were intended to ameliorate a credit crisis and to keep it from spreading. Instead they've inflamed the crisis into an outright panic that now has spread around the world and triggered a recession. *By Donald L. Luskin*



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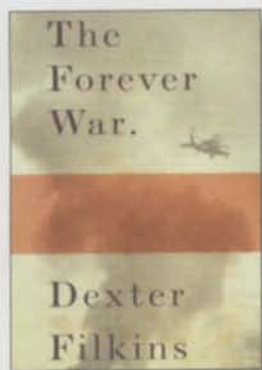
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A Model War Correspondent



The Forever War,
by Dexter Filkins
(Knopf, 384 pp., \$25)

DOUGLAS J. FEITH

NEW YORK TIMES correspondent Dexter Filkins has written a gripping book, rich in vivid vignettes of courage, chaos, service, depravity, and death. *The Forever War* is not history or policy analysis. It is more in the nature of a slide show—a series of brief, often stunning, observations, mainly about combatants, victims, and reporters in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Filkins highlights the murderousness of the Taliban, of the Baathists, and of the jihadist terrorists who think of themselves as “forever” at war with the infidels. He introduces us to an Afghan boy, Faiz Ahmad, “seventeen, wearing a pair of wire-rimmed glasses, a hajj cap, and no beard,” who seemed listless but came to life when he had a chance to respond to a question about his religious education. He said his teacher taught him that “it is written in the Koran that we must kill the non-believers.” Filkins writes that Ahmad was “as close to a perfect specimen as the Taliban could imagine.”

Mr. Feith, under secretary of defense for policy from 2001 to 2005, is a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute and the author of *War and Decision: Inside the Pentagon at the Dawn of the War on Terrorism*.

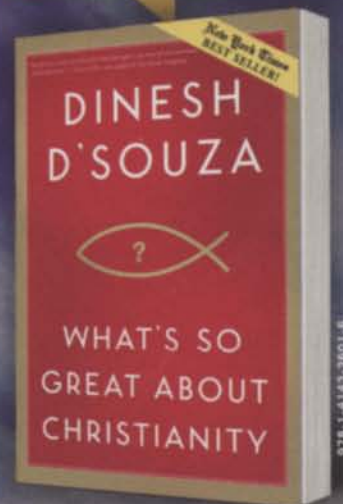
and quotes him as declaring: “There is no end to the jihad. . . . It will go on forever until doomsday.”

In Iraq, Filkins talks with Yacob Yusuf, whose brother Saadi was killed by Saddam Hussein’s regime. A government official allowed Yusuf to recover the body. The official told him he is “very lucky,” because most people never get a body back. The official waited for thanks, reports Yusuf, “so I thanked him”; but before he could receive the body, he had to pay for the bullets that had been used in the execution. “Two bullets they used to kill Saadi,” Yusuf said, crying: “Two bullets. And I paid for them. One hundred fifty dinars. And this man gave me a receipt.” Filkins comments: “Iraq was filled with people like Yacob Yusuf. They weren’t survivors as much as they were leftovers. The ruined by-products of terrible times.”

Filkins, who lived in Iraq for over three years following Saddam’s overthrow, touches time and again on the weird mix of conspiracy-mindedness and anti-Americanism found in so many Iraqis. He highlights their tendency “to see conspiracy everywhere, to reject the official version of whatever was said—to never, even, believe their own eyes.” One of the especially telling stories is of an Iraqi army colonel who had deserted and was picked up by U.S. Marines and fed peanut butter and crackers. The colonel talked at some length about his role in Saddam’s various wars: “War upon war,” he said. Though he was a professional soldier, he said he had not joined the service “to engage in fanciful adventures.” After knocking the pay and the food that soldiers received, he complained that Saddam “starts this thing with the Americans and tells us to defend the country against the invader. . . . Tell me what is the sense in that?” But then the colonel came to the conclusion that Saddam was so bad . . . that he must be “an American agent.”

Filkins has an acute sense of the absurd and the maniacal, but he is not cynical. Serious-minded compassion runs through the book. The reader comes away with a complex set of impressions of Afghan and Iraqi society—pictures not just of extremists, but also of sympathetic, hospitable, long-suffering people craving an end to barbarity and inspired by the right to vote. Filkins says Iraq had

WHAT'S
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the marks of a traumatized country, or of “a mental hospital”—but Iraqis also showed an eagerness to reach for normalcy, to try to “build an ordinary country.”

“Every morning, I come to work with a passion to serve my country,” Aladeen Muhammad Abdul Hamza, a new policeman in the town of Diwaniya, told Filkins in the summer of 2003. But the effort to promote decency and an ordinary life, writes Filkins, required enormous courage:

They went to the slaughter. Thousands and thousands of them: editors, pamphleteers, judges, and police officers, and women like [political activist] Wijdan al-Khuzai. 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.

Filkins recounts how the insurgents warned those Iraqis who were considering participating in the elections that “we will cut off your heads and the heads of your children.” On Election Day, he visited a polling place in a school. Loud explosions boomed from outside. An Iraqi there exclaimed: “Do you hear that, do you hear the bombs? . . . We don’t care. Do you understand? We don’t care. . . . We all have to die. . . . To die for this, well, at least I will be dying for something.”

The Forever War discusses the Americans in Iraq and Afghanistan—mainly soldiers and Marines—with compassion and skepticism. Some Filkins describes with admiration. Often, his interest is in how the Iraqis saw them. He notes that U.S. forces were often short of Iraqi interpreters: “That meant that for many Iraqis, the typical 19-year-old army corporal from South Dakota was not a youthful innocent carrying America’s goodwill; he was a terrifying combination of firepower and ignorance.”

Filkins’s book shows what makes a good reporter. First of all, with impressive courage, Filkins puts himself time and again where remarkable things are happening: in Taliban-controlled

Afghanistan in the 1990s, in Manhattan in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, in Afghanistan again during the war in the fall of 2001, in Iraq on the first day of the entry of U.S. forces, and at the funeral of Saddam’s sons, Uday and Qusay. He continually finds himself in the middle of firefights and riots.

Second, Filkins writes well. His style is straightforward and unadorned, but he makes elegant distinctions—e.g., the Northern Alliance commanders in Afghanistan were “vain but rarely pompous”—and he savors the bizarre. He explains that the “craziest” thing about the suicide bombings was how the head of the bomber often survived. Recounting a bombing at a Baghdad mosque, he writes:

Sure enough, they’d found the head. They’d placed it on a platter, like John the Baptist’s, and set it on the ground next to an interior doorway. It was in good shape, considering what it had been through. Some nicks and cuts and a thin coating of dust, which gave the skin a yellow hue. The most curious aspect of the face was the man’s eyebrows: They were raised, as if in surprise. Which struck me as odd, given that he would have been the only person who knew ahead of time what was going to happen.

And third, his writing shows self-awareness, is modest in tone, and appreciates moral complexity. There is none of the all-knowing certitude of the self-righteous. At one point, Filkins wonders: “Why do the insurgents let us [journalists] stay in Baghdad? . . . I assumed they had decided that we were useful to them. That was not a comforting thought, even if it meant they would let us survive.” His book is full of telling details, but as he rises above Baghdad in a helicopter, he contemplates the validity of his pessimism and the limits of his own ground-based understanding: “Under the spell of the whirring motor I felt suddenly hopeful for the country below. . . . It was useful to fly in helicopters for this reason, I thought to myself, useful to think this way, to take a wider view of the world. Too much detail, too much death, clouded the mind.”

The period covered in *The Forever War* ends in 2006, before “the surge” in Iraq—before the Sunni tribal leaders became U.S. allies and before the rout of al-Qaeda in Anbar. So the book is generally downbeat on Iraq’s prospects: “I’d given up hope long ago that anyone in the American military knew any better than I did. Outside, Anbar seemed hopeless. Ramadi lay in ruins.” Yet Filkins

Filkins’s writing shows self-awareness, is modest in tone, and appreciates moral complexity.

astutely touches on the early signs that the Iraqi Sunnis were souring on their jihadist allies. He quotes a Sunni insurgent who, after denouncing al-Qaeda for killing not just Americans but Iraqis, notes: “According to our Iraqi tribal traditions and beliefs, each tribe must take revenge for the death of one of its members. . . . This is a solemn obligation, even if it means you must kill a member of al-Qaeda.”

Recent reporting by Filkins marvels at how Iraq has improved over the last 18 months. In a September 2, 2008, article in the *New York Times*, he gives a wide-eyed but sophisticated account of a military parade in Ramadi, in which the Americans marched without helmets. Two years ago, he notes, Anbar Province was the “the most lethal place for the Americans in Iraq” and its capital, Ramadi, was “a moonscape of rubble and ruins.” But now, with violence down 90 percent over the past two years and al-Qaeda in Iraq “severely degraded, if not crushed altogether,” the Americans have handed to Iraqis the responsibility for security in the province.

In a September 2008 interview with *TheAtlantic.com*, Filkins describes the recent progress in Iraq as having made the country difficult for him to recognize: “The park out in front of the house where I live—on the Tigris River—was a dead, dying, spooky place. It’s now filled with people—families with children, women walking alone, even at night. That was inconceivable in 2006.” The Iraqis there judge the parks safe; they’re “voting with their feet.” “It’s a wonderful thing to see,” Filkins comments, with humane amazement untainted by U.S. domestic political spin.

Filkins is worth reading.

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