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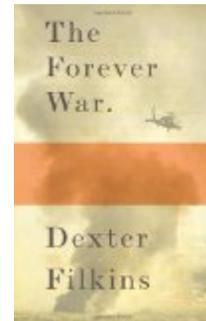


Dexter Filkins. *The Forever War*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008. x + 368 pp. \$25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-307-26639-2.

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## “Us” vs. “Them”: Dexter Filkins’s War Reporting

At the end of his 1944 play *No Exit*, one of Jean Paul Sartre’s characters famously exclaims: “Hell is other people.” Dexter Filkins’s book, *The Forever War*, endeavors to describe both the hellish wars in Afghanistan and Iraq as well as the “other people”—be they insurgents, civilians, or young marines—fatefully caught up in them. To readers versed in the world news pages of the *New York Times*, the hell described should be a familiar one: Filkins, a reporter at the *Times* since 2000, has been a central figure in the paper’s coverage; his frontline reports from Falluja in 2004 won him the George Polk for War Reporting award. The treatment here, though, of the “other people” he encounters is distinct and varied, working elegantly off a simple but shifting dichotomy between “us” and “them.”

Abandoning what he calls “the view from the air,” Filkins largely avoids any discussion of either war’s political or intellectual genesis, preferring instead a series of vignettes that tracks the movements of those involved (p. 145). At the prologue’s outset, the dichotomy between “us” and “them” seems familiar enough: Filkins aligns himself with marines in the battle for Falluja. The *ihadis* against whom they are fighting are nameless, largely unseen. The marines, by contrast, are all introduced by name and hometown. When Filkins freezes in the middle of a gun battle, he admits that “for a moment, I felt like a coward ... and then I remembered it wasn’t my war, not my army. I’m just a goddamn reporter” (p. 7).

As the book progresses, he shifts the dichotomy, moving away from a “we” that encompasses Americans

in opposition to an Iraqi “they.” (The binary of the opposition was never particularly accurate, as Filkins shows, because the Green Zone—created by the American-led Coalition Provisional Authority yet serviced by Peruvian guards and Indonesian launderers—is a space *par excellence* for globalized labor.) Slowly, the “we” becomes all those whose experiences have entwined them in war, while the readers—those who experience the war only through its coverage—become the “they.” Filkins captures the shift eloquently near the book’s completion: “My friend George, an American reporter I’d gotten to know in Iraq, told me he couldn’t have a conversation with anyone about Iraq who hadn’t been there. I told him I couldn’t have a conversation with anyone who hadn’t been there about anything at all” (p. 340).

Understanding the shift is crucial to making sense of what seems to be Filkins’s central purpose. Though *Forever War* could be construed as a parable of the awfulness of *every* war, its meaning here seems more precise. Put briefly: in both Afghanistan and Iraq, the Americans entered situations where there had already been developed “an elaborate set of rules designed to spare as many fighters as they could. So the war could go on forever. Men fought, men switched sides, men lined up and fought again” (pp. 50-51). Forever, in this view, is the *effect* of shifting practices—what Filkins describes elsewhere in the book as “figuring out the truth by a different set of standards” (p. 276). The key component is that what appears to American observers as irrational and nonsensical is part of a highly developed cultural sys-

tem for dealing with long-term situations. Rather than explain what each of the shifting moments adds up to, the book's contribution is to trace out the mutual incomprehension that has accompanied Americans in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

If there are patterns to be drawn from these conversations, Filkins is hesitant to do so. Perhaps fairly so, as patterns tend to be visible only from distances, a luxury he affords neither himself nor his readers; besides, a great deal of writing has already gone into connecting the dots in Iraq and Afghanistan before ever making sense of the individual dots on their own terms.

The sequence of the book is largely chronological. Apart from the aforementioned prologue in Falluja, the book proper begins in pre-September 11 Afghanistan with his coverage of the Taliban. On September 11, Filkins was in New York City and reported from the wreckage. The majority of the book occurs in Iraq, where Filkins was from the day of the invasion in 2003 until at least 2006 (it is unclear what the precise timeframe is when his reporting leaves off, though it is certainly prior to the "surge," the time in January 2007 when President George Bush announced he would send additional combat troops to Iraq). The bulk of the book concerns his wide-ranging Iraq experience, from interviews with members of the Sunni insurgency to eyewitness accounts of car bombings.

*Forever War* would be an excellent addition to courses attempting to make sense of the contemporary relationships between media and war. The writing is excellent,

the descriptions evocative, and the reporter's aptitude for capturing the thoughts and actions of others is top notch. (He quotes a sergeant saying, after shooting an Iraqi woman civilian: "I'm sorry. But the chick was in the way" [p. 91].) It would be especially useful to compare the prose in the book with some of the articles he wrote for the *Times* to get a sense of what is gained and lost in different journalistic genres. Also useful would be to read *Forever War* alongside one of the many books that have attempted to describe the ideological and political decisions that led us to war (George Packer's fine *The Assassin's Gate: America in Iraq* [2005] comes to mind).

Perhaps the most interesting way of incorporating the book, though, is to take seriously two quite distinct roles for journalism that the book presents to the reader. The first, what we might term the endogenous role of journalism, takes seriously the idea of good journalism for its own sake. In this view, Filkins's book is successful not because it might change political policy or public opinion but because it captures the human essence of these horrendous conflicts from a variety of perspectives. The second view, what we might call the exogenous role of journalism, looks at journalism in relation to other things. This is probably the most common rhetorical role for which journalism gets deployed (and one that journalists often use themselves). Journalism's importance, in this view, is to foster a healthy democracy. The two need not be mutually exclusive, but *Forever War* serves as an excellent reminder that good journalism—done on its own terms, to shift the ways in which "we" identify with "others," wherever they may be—ought to precede its potentially munificent external effects.

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