

Robert Fisk addresses Sydney audience on history, journalism and Iraq

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Robert Fisk, Middle East correspondent for the British *Independent*, addressed an audience of over 500 at the University of Sydney on October 5. The well-known journalist was visiting Australia to speak at the Edward Said memorial lecture and to promote his forthcoming book, *The Great War of Civilization*.

Fisk is one of the few journalists who have sought—or been permitted—to present an honest account of events in US-occupied Iraq. He has more than 30 years of experience as a war correspondent. Before taking up his first Middle East assignment in 1976, he worked for six years covering the conflict in Northern Ireland. He subsequently reported on the Lebanese civil war, the Soviet intervention into Afghanistan, the Iran-Iraq war, the crisis in Algeria, the communal conflicts that accompanied the breakup of Yugoslavia, the NATO assault on Serbia in 1999 and, over the past four years, the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Throughout his speech, Fisk conveyed that the death, destruction, cruelty and inhumanity he has seen had left him determined to report “history as it happens”, so no one could say “we didn’t know, nobody told us”. Over the past three decades, he has built up a library of over 350,000 documents, notebooks and files on the conflicts he has covered.

Quoting an Israeli journalist who had told him the role of journalists was to “monitor the centres of power”, Fisk declared: “I think that is the best definition of my job I’ve ever heard. Especially when governments and politicians take us to war, when they have decided that they will kill and others will die.”

Fisk writes from a liberal—not a socialist—political standpoint. Nevertheless, his greatest strength is a deep-going concern with the historical processes that have shaped the events he has witnessed.

Fisk told his Sydney audience: “I used to argue, hopelessly I’m sure, that every reporter should carry a

history book in their back-pocket. In 1992, I was in Sarajevo and once, as Serb shells whistled over my head, I stood upon the very paving stone where Gavrilo Princip stood as he fired the fatal shot that sent my father to the trenches of the First World War. It was as if history was a giant echo-chamber ...

“How did we go from that titanic war, the war of 1914-1918, through the making of the Middle East, through the Second World War, through the Arab-Israeli War, through such a bolt of historical tragedy, and reach Iraq?...

“After the Allied victory in 1918, the victors divided up the lands of their former enemies. And in the space of just 17 months, they created the borders of Northern Ireland, Yugoslavia and most of the Middle East. I have spent my entire career, in Belfast, and Sarajevo, and Beirut, and Baghdad, watching the people within those borders burn.”

Fisk is keenly aware of the role of great power intrigues in determining the course of events in the Middle East—throughout the 20th century and up to the present day. “America invaded Iraq not for Saddam Hussein’s mythical ‘weapons of mass destruction’ which had long ago been destroyed,” he said, “but to change the map of the Middle East, much as father’s generation had done more than 80 years earlier.” The war stemmed from not only the desire to dominate oil supplies, but a “visceral need to project power on a massive scale” on the part of the United States.

Answering official proclamations that the war was “going well”, Fisk attempted to give a sense of what the occupation forces, western journalists and, above all, the Iraqi people were confronting as a result of the invasion.

During the month of July, 1,100 victims of violent deaths were brought into the mortuaries of Baghdad. Fisk pointed out that if that figure were extrapolated across other cities and towns, it would most likely be tripled. “That is 36,000 a year,” he noted. “People say 100,000

[Iraqi] dead since the beginning of the invasion is an exaggeration? I doubt it.” The US and British forces have released no public figures on Iraqi casualties.

Fisk described the insurgency against the US-led forces and US-backed government in Baghdad as having taken on a “savage, epic quality”, with constant attacks and daily suicide bombings targeting foreign troops, government security forces and western contractors. Such was the popular hatred of the occupation, any westerner was a potential target.

Replying to a question on the role of Islamic extremism in the insurgency, Fisk stated: “The problem in Iraq is not ‘extreme Islamic ideology’. It is about foreigners running the country. And in these circumstances, all kinds of factions and groups will find that they have a common interest. One of the problems in the Arab world is that because of all the emergency legislation, which we were quite happy to see on the books, you couldn’t have open freedom of expression or opposition. So what happened? The only place people could meet was the mosque. And then we call them extremists, fundamentalists ...

“You just can’t keep saying ‘extremists’. When you put a foreign army in someone else’s land, that [the insurgency] is what is going to happen. You can call them ‘extremists’, ‘fundamentalists’, ‘terrorists’, ‘killers’ and, believe me, they are. But that is why they are who they are.”

Fisk noted that the Iraqi insurgents he had met in Fallujah were veterans of the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s, part of a generation that had “grown up knowing nothing but suffering and death”.

In contrast to the official propaganda, Fisk observed that for some Iraqis, the US capture of Saddam Hussein was a factor in convincing them to take up arms: “The one reason they would not join the resistance to the US occupation was the fear that if the Americans withdrew, Saddam would return. That fear had now been taken away.”

The scale of the insurgency was such that US-led forces and the Iraqi government used helicopters to transport dignitaries between the Green Zone fortress in the centre of Baghdad to the airport just 10 miles away. “All they see of the country they rule”, he said, “is through the gun-slits of their own defences”. Iraq’s capital had become a “city of walls, 20-feet high, running for mile after mile along highways, and shopping streets and the Tigris River”.

Reporters in Iraq were largely practising what Fisk labeled “hotel journalism”—staying in their guarded rooms

and using mobile phones to get information from American and British spokesmen, who were “marooned in their own quarters”. He described how he and other journalists still moved around Baghdad in an attempt to carry out independent reporting. “We do so in private cars, with Iraqi friends, even traveling the airport road,” he said. “But we do so quietly and quickly, often hiding behind an Arabic language newspaper, peaking out the window, stopping only for a minute after a suicide bombing to look at the carnage.... One quick word with a witness, then back in the car before the crowd comes over.”

Fisk spent some time detailing the evidence he had seen of some of the horrors inflicted on the Iraqi people by the Baathist regime, and drew attention to how they were used to justify the actions of the occupation forces.

He commented: “It is a dark comparison that Bush and Blair are making. Saddam tortured and executed women in Abu Ghraib. We only sexually abused prisoners and killed a few of them, and murdered some suspects in Bagram and subjected them to inhuman treatment in Guantanamo. We’re not as bad as Saddam! Thus it became inevitable that the symbol of Saddam’s shame, the prison of Abu Ghraib, subsequently became the symbol of our shame too ...”

“I think it is finished in Iraq. I think the war is lost,” Fisk stressed during questions and answers. “At some point I think there will be some type of cataclysmic event—the over-running of an American base, an attack on the Green Zone—that forces governments to tell the truth.”

In conclusion, the journalist told his audience: “We have to accept that our tragedies lie always in our past. We have to live with our ancestors’ follies and suffer for it, just as we are making the next generation suffer now.”

Fisk’s book, *The Great War of Civilization*, is being published by Fourth Estate and will be available in bookshops in November.



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