

# Revelations of war crimes and moralizing idealism

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*The Way of the World: A Story of Truth and Hope in an Age of Extremism*, by Ron Suskind. New York: Harper, 2008, 398 pp.

Several months before invading Iraq, President Bush dismissed irrefutable evidence that Iraq did not possess weapons of mass destruction.

By the close of 2003, with no weapons of mass destruction found and the American public beginning to question the rationale for the war, the White House fabricated a letter that “proved” the purported links between Iraq and al Qaeda as well as Colin Powell’s claim before the United Nations that Niger had shipped uranium to Iraq.

So reports the *Wall Street Journal*’s former senior national affairs writer Ron Suskind in *The Way of the World: A Story of Truth and Hope in an Age of Extremism*.

Suskind argues that these impeachable offenses are manifestations of America’s loss of its core values and hope for a better future; and that extremism, both in the US and the Mideast had undermined the inability “to walk in the shoes of the ‘other.’”

This idealism, coupled with a selective historical memory, seriously flaws an otherwise readable and important book.

Suskind’s evidence for his claims is compelling. A highly placed American intelligence official, who is “always right,” told the author that a few months before the invasion of Iraq, top British intelligence official Michael Shipster had a secret meeting with the Iraq intelligence chief, Tahir Jalil Habbush. During this meeting, Habbush told Shipster “there were no weapons.” “This guy,” related the American, “was the real McCoy. He knew all there was to know.” Yet, when this information was presented to Bush, the American intelligence official reports that the President said, “Fuck it. We’re going in [to Iraq].”

Habbush was also involved with the fabricated letter, though in an indirect manner. The White House produced a handwritten letter, backdated to July 1, 2001, from Tahir Jalil Habbush to Saddam with the former’s forged signature. A CIA agent then hand-carried the letter to Baghdad for public dissemination.

The forged letter falsely affirmed that Mohammed Atta, the alleged mastermind of the September 11 terrorist attacks, had visited Iraq and was prepared to carry out attacks on its behalf. It likewise mentioned “a shipment from Niger,” thereby providing apparent substantiation for Bush’s lying claim in his January 2003 State of the Union address that Iraq had sought to obtain uranium in Africa in order to develop nuclear weapons.

The British and American mainstream media were quick to trumpet this CIA forgery. London’s *Daily Telegraph* published an article with extensive quotes from the letter and statements supporting its authenticity. Over the next few days, the American media, visual and written, performed the same duty with even greater enthusiasm.

Former CIA Director George Tenet and former Tenet deputy Robert Richer (Suskind’s main source for the Habbush letter story) have rebutted Suskind’s claims about the Habbush letter. Suskind has responded with a transcript of a taped conversation (available at [www.ronsuskind.com](http://www.ronsuskind.com)) with Richer in which the former CIA deputy states that the Habbush letter was in fact written on White House stationary.

Suskind takes us on a walk in others’ shoes by creating an omnipotent narrator who is privy to the thoughts of real and fictional characters. Bush and Cheney, as well as Muslim fundamentalists, represent the extremists refusing to walk in the shoes of the other; while characters such as a young Pakistani Muslim working in Washington, D.C., an American mother, Ann Patrila, who takes in an Afghan college student, a US bureaucrat trying to stop nuclear

proliferation, and the late Benazir Bhutto—represent a willingness to “revive hope” and “the beating heart of moral energy.”

Not surprisingly, to walk in Bush’s shoes is, according to Suskind, to walk in a “bullying presence” whose decisions are based on his “gut” instead of analysis. A prime example of this “presence” is an anecdote concerning the sadistic pleasure Bush experiences as he bicycles alongside his aides’ as they participate in “The President’s 100-Degree Club” (running 3 miles in triple-digit Crawford, Texas, heat) while tauntingly calling out “losers” to those who can’t finish.

Bush’s bullying, sadistic personality may explain his obscene dismissal of the news that Iraq did not possess WMD, but it explains neither why the US declared a preemptive, brutal war on Iraq nor the larger, objective conditions underlying this decision.

Certainly, Suskind is correct that many Americans have lost hope in the future, and if by a loss of America’s core values he means the principles of the Enlightenment that informed America’s founding documents, he’s also correct. But these losses long predate the Bush Administration and have far deeper roots than the incumbent President’s personality. The connection between the decision to invade Iraq and America’s declining economic power (and the rise of competing national economies) dating back to the 1960s, receives no attention. Nor does the fact that America has been at war, either directly or indirectly, with a number of countries throughout this period.

Instead, Suskind offers whitewashed, simplistic descriptions of American foreign policy. Wendy Chamberlain, a fictional character who heads the Washington D.C. Middle East institute and is among the characters whom the author depicts as representing hope and America’s core values, thinks the Marshall Plan was implemented because it was “the right thing to do, and when you do the right thing, you don’t ask for anything in return.”

That America enacted the Marshall Plan as a strategic decision aimed at insuring markets for its commodities and avoiding the kind of crisis that followed WWI is not considered.

The author himself writes that because the seventeenth century’s Enlightenment didn’t visit the Muslim countries, the belief that “nothing is as it appears” informs their often duplicitous foreign policy decisions. But because America did experience this Enlightenment, “[t]his sort of brutal gamesmanship has been America’s

strong suit” until “[i]ts latest generation of political managers and war-on-terror strategists.”

Suskind’s assertion begs several questions. Has the author forgotten or chosen to ignore American imperialism’s history of duplicitous actions, e.g., its claims of promoting democracy while effectively creating military-ruled vassalages in much of South America, or the near-genocidal efforts to bring “democracy” to Vietnam? Is he not also aware of America’s history of direct or indirect role in hindering the efforts of Middle East countries to achieve a more enlightened, democratic form of government?

Suskind’s solution to the current crisis facing mankind amounts to an appeal to global idealism. “The world works” when “everyone moves forward, in a kind of *modest* (italics added) unison,” he affirms. But how does everyone go about moving forward? And “modestly,” at that?

To posit, as Suskind finally does, that this movement is possible only by returning to the “American story,” which is “not about the privileged defending what they have with mighty armies or earnest self-regard” (a story Suskind ascribes to the extremist Muslim world) but about “common people” taking control of their lives and “discovering their truest potential,” flies in the face of history.

The twentieth century lays strewn with the corpses of millions (including those of “common” Americans), who died defending the possessions of the privileged. History also proves that no fundamental social change has occurred “modestly,” as the American, French, and Russian revolutions attest. It is the kind of idealistic interpretation of history presented by Suskind that the privileged promote and depend upon as an ideological prop for their rule.

Ron Suskind has provided a valuable service in unearthing the lies underlying the criminal invasion of Iraq and consequent tragic loss of lives. But that this service is undermined by an idealistic interpretation of history has necessarily resulted in an equally idealistic, non-tenable solution.



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