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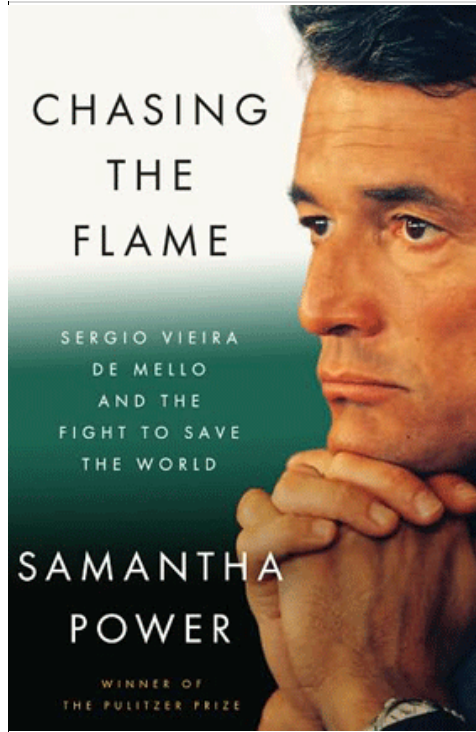
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The Stop Smiling Review



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Wednesday, May 28, 2008

Chasing the Flame: ***Sergio Vieira de Mello and the Fight to Save the World***

By Samantha Power
(Penguin Press)

Reviewed by Howie Kahn

A few months ago, a friend invited me to brunch and I declined. My explanation: I needed to finish reading, for review, Samantha Power's new 640-page biography of the late international diplomat Sergio Vieira de Mello.

"Sergio... who?" she asked. "You know," I huffed, hoping she'd snap to recall: *Of course! Vieira de Mello! The all-world geopolitical problem-solving badass!* Instead, she said something about pancakes.

She must have had at least heard of him, I thought, so I prompted: "Assassinated United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights? Special Representative of the Secretary General in Iraq? Killed in Baghdad in 2003? Truck bomb?"

Nothing.

A thousand pounds of explosives, personally rigged by al-Qaeda's Abu Mussab al-Zarqawi, blasted the Canal Hotel into abstraction, I said. Then, as if I personally knew the Brazilian-born UN lifer sent to Iraq by Kofi Annan to fix it, essentially — this acquired familiarity being the benchmark of good biography — I sadly remarked: "They killed Sergio. Don't you remember?"

And she didn't.

I confess, had I not been actively engaged in reading Power's book, which explores three decades of UN conflict-intervention through the narrative lens of Vieira de Mello's steadfast fieldwork, I wouldn't have remembered the terms, the names, or the details either. I knew Vieira de Mello died in Iraq, but that fact was merely a BBC soundbyte to me.

Only when I started relaying additional facts grabbed from the pages — the UN's insistence on operating outside the Green Zone so as to brand itself apart from the Coalition Provisional Authority (hence, the Canal as home base); the strangling, metastasizing institutional ambiguities of the UN Security Council's Resolution 1483, which effectively legitimized the occupation; the US Armed Forces' limp-dick attempt at rescuing Vieira de Mello, who was buried in rubble and nearing death for four hours, not with the requisite shoring and spreading equipment (wooden beams, Jaws of Life), but with string, a shower curtain, and a straw handbag — did I realize that Power's stylistically spare but exhaustively detailed document had impelled me, uncharacteristically, to lecture at the pitch of an activist. To which my interlocutor said something telling, an echo of what much of the First World has been saying in one way or another about the planet's most ideologically useful but pragmatically imperiled institution since its inception: "Fuck the UN." (Apropos to her own argument for kaffeeklatsch colonialism she added, "just come to brunch.")

But for Sergio, for his unflagging belief in the charter of an organization that remains notionally paramount but rendered tragically ineffectual by the deeply entrenched whims and rivalries of its member states, I skipped the flapjacks. It only seemed right and conceptually in line with my own reductionist analysis of Vieira de Mello's legacy: *Fuck the UN? Fuck you.*

It's not that Power, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide*, seasoned campaigner against the genocide in Darfur, renowned professor at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government and a onetime foreign policy advisor to Barack Obama, is asking her readers to skip breakfast per se. She is, however, calling for a first-person response to *Chasing the Flame*; one that involves, at the very least, questioning who, in the twenty-first century, will assume responsibility for recalibrating what has come to pass as our "human rights." And then getting behind that figure. Had Vieira de Mello lived beyond his brief stint in Iraq, this guardianship might very well have belonged to him.

Based on over 400 interviews, Power meditatively profiles Vieira de Mello's 34-year UN world tour. He dealt with refugee aid and repatriation in Bangladesh, Sudan, Cyprus, Mozambique, Vietnam, Cambodia and Rwanda; acted as an iconoclastic and angry political adviser in a classically tensile peacekeeping mission in Lebanon; and, in 1999, became the temporary supreme ruler of Kosovo, then assumed similar viceroy duties in East Timor, guiding each break-away nation toward the hope of an autonomous future.

Power casts the envoy as an inimitably multifaceted polymath, an outsized bureaucrat of Hollywood proportions. She tackles policy and personality with equal deftness, comprehensively depicting the paradoxical elements of Vieira de Mello's character. He is both skilled negotiator and obsequious pleaser; Wilt Chamberlain-caliber womanizer and born-again monogamist. Also: fearless bomb-dodger, lonely charmer, statesman with no state, Sisyphus, Quixote, Bobby Kennedy, James Bond; a singular political force with a unique gift for both talking *and* listening; an atheist and aspiring Buddhist, a self-rehabilitated idealist, a habitual drinker of Johnnie Walker Black, a letter writer, a momma's boy. He is the sum total of a Bob Dylan song. Anthemic, page after page.

In the end, it's Power's grandiose but grounded tuning that allows her to leverage Sergio the Man into Sergio the Lesson. Her epilogue dissects and promotes Vieira de Mello's methods in a way typically reserved for leaders of a more spiritual order. Post mortem, Vieira de Mello becomes the Dalai Lama of diplomacy.

Power ultimately prescribes for the post-9/11 *and* post-Bush world a humanistic, starkly pragmatic politics — a welcome hybrid of world affairs and self help. Her instructions are terse, relevant, and battle-tested. Drawing from Vieira de Mello's career, Power recommends making fearful people less so, measuring true legitimacy on the basis of performance, a more inclusive model for fact-finding and face-to-face negotiation, prioritizing law and security, and placing the highest premium on... wait for it... complexity, dignity, humility, and patience.

Few books of this magnitude dare to end with such explicit moralizing, but how else to teach, if not directly? We need these maxims on the page. And in practice, we could do far worse than to parlay Sergio the Lesson into Sergio the Doctrine.

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