

What Happens in War

BYLINE: ANTHONY SWOFFORD.

ANTHONY SWOFFORD is the author of the memoir *Jarhead* and the novel *Exit A*. He is at work on a new novel.

SECTION: IDEAS + REVIEWS; Book Review; Pg. 54

LENGTH: 1799 words

HIGHLIGHT: **Dexter Filkins's** decade in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq

DEXTER FILKINS HAS BEEN COVERING the biggest story of the last ten years for the last ten years. A good argument can be made that this *New York Times* reporter has seen more war than any other journalist working today, not to mention any soldier or marine. From Kabul to Kandahar, Baghdad to Ramadi, Falluja to Haditha, Filkins has been bullets and blood and copy-inches deep in these wars that have fatigued, befuddled, and killed sheiks and politicians, snipers and supply officers, civilians and insurgents. His need to be there for the story and his seemingly indefatigable ability to sip tea and dodge bullets whizzing by his ear are a pointed corrective to the blather of the blogosphere and the nauseating (and lethal) know-nothingness inside the Beltway and, more often than not, the Green Zone.

Sublime and tenacious, *The Forever War* takes us from Kabul in 1998 through the summer of 2006 in Iraq. In the course of this journey, Filkins reminds us that there is still some way of comprehending man's worst undertaking, a messy war: getting dirty (and sometimes bloody and beaten) while asking tough questions of everyone involved.

In Iraq, for example, things sometimes fall apart before the reporter is able to ask questions. One morning Filkins is drinking his coffee when an explosion goes off near enough to the *Times* compound that "the walls of the house swayed and the windows rattled." A car bomber in an ambulance targeting the Baghdad headquarters of the International Committee of the Red Cross had been cut off in the road by another driver--a Good Samaritan, as Filkins calls him, who paid with his own life, "his hands on the wheel, his head arched in a final fiery grimace."

As Filkins surveys the carnage, he hears two thuds in the distance and the news that there have been two more bombs. With four colleagues he hurries over to Shaab, a poor Shiite neighborhood, the scene of a police-station bombing. Almost at once, the situation turns ugly. Filkins gets into a shouting match with an Iraqi civilian, which leads to more ominous developments: "Someone stripped the phone from my hand, then my notebook, and then others grabbed my arms. I began to float, as if in a riptide, dragged to the sea.

. . ." An old man repeats the word *aktuluhum*: kill them. Waleed al-Hadithi, the driver, saves Filkins from whatever nasty end the crowd had planned for him, but still the men and their car are pelted with bricks. Why did the crowd turn on three western journalists and an Iraqi driver and interpreter? Filkins leaves that to the reader's imagination.

Early in *Dispatches*, his masterpiece of Vietnam reportage, Michael Herr writes: "Everywhere you went people said, 'Well, I hope you get a story,' and everywhere you went you did." The same is true for Filkins in Iraq. And Syria. In the border town of Abu Kamal, Filkins follows the story of two twenty-five-year-old men, cousins, one from Syria, the other from Iraq, who had reportedly been killed by an American sniper while crossing into Iraq at night. The border had always been porous, and the adjoining inhabitants "belonged to the same tribe, smuggled the same goods, grazed their sheep on both sides. No one had ever stopped them from doing that before." Filkins has tea with the father of one of the men, who predicts the pipeline of willing suicide bombers into Iraq from Syria: "People here are angry enough to go and fight. They are quite ready to go and fight the Americans."

In the same town, he interviews another man, who offers a large Middle Eastern lunch and asks Filkins: "Would you mind if we watched a short video?" It turns out to be martyrdom propaganda, depicting the beheading of a Caucasian man. After the head is held high onscreen, the reporter's elated host is "beside himself, rocking back and forth, running his finger across his throat."

Readers might ask why this book is necessary. After all, it covers a lot of the same ground as other books--for instance, Anthony Shadid's *Night Draws Near: Iraq's People in the Shadow of America's War*, one of the more important and compelling accounts of the hostilities in Iraq. And indeed, *The Forever War* is based completely on the reporting Filkins has done for the *Los Angeles Times* and *The New York Times* in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq. If you happen to be a reader of these papers, you've no doubt been down some of these same bloody avenues already with the author. The itinerary is familiar. There is the bombing of the Red Cross building; the rise of the Mahdi army; Chalabi's fall from grace and grandstanding return; the battles for Falluja and Ramadi; the internecine Sunni conflicts; disastrous decisions by American politicians and military leaders. Is this simply Filkins's due after filling 561 notebooks: a yearlong fellowship in Boston to write a book after the ravages of war?

Some readers and critics will make that complaint. But it's an unfair one. Starting with the invasion of Afghanistan, Filkins established himself as one of the premier chroniclers of the conflict and its political and tactical maneuverings on all sides. Minute-by-minute war reporting doesn't get any better than this. And without the constraints of *Times* style, Filkins is free to explore the emotional highways and byways of each story. In these pages, we encounter not just the facts, but also the impact, the ripple effects.

As Janet Malcolm famously observed in *The Journalist and the Murderer*, "Every journalist who is not too stupid or too full of himself to notice what is going on knows that what he does is morally indefensible." The indefensibility of the journalist's intrusion is amplified in warfare. Of the many heartbreaking deaths and deformities that Filkins narrates for us, none is as tinged with this

dubious morality as the death of Marine Corps Lance Corporal William L. Miller, twenty-two, of Pearland, Texas.

This young soldier was killed during the second battle of Falluja--what the Marine Corps has come to call this war's Khe Sanh. "The generals were reporting hundreds of dead," recounts the author, "thousands even, we knew that from the radio, but we weren't seeing many. You'd think by then we would have seen an arm. A head." Filkins and his photographer, Ash Gilbertson, were traveling with a contingent of marines, one of whom had snapped a photo of a corpse at the top of a nearby minaret. At once, Gilbertson asked for permission to document this scene for the paper. "With the fighting over," we read, "it seemed the thing to do." Captain Read Omohundro, a universally respected thirty-four-year-old *uber*-officer, gave the journalists a dozen guys to go on the photo mission.

Before this misbegotten mission is over, Lance Corporal Miller is dead, stuck halfway up the minaret. The young (some would say crazy) marines in his unit risk their own lives again and again, climbing up the minaret to retrieve their comrade's body. This is no surprise for Filkins, who has already seen such a scenario several times during the battle for Falluja: live marines retrieving dead marines, themselves becoming injured or dead marines in the process. Gilbertson, meanwhile, is a wreck, "seated on the stoop, helmet crooked, mumbling to himself like a child. My fault." Miller is finally retrieved, but the contingent is attacked by small-arms fire, and after delivering their comrade's corpse to a troop carrier, the men must extract themselves from the firefight.

It's a harrowing and problematic sequence of events for the journalists. As they escape the scene, Filkins hears his friend and colleague mutter, "I want to die. I hope they shoot me." Back at the base camp, two marines react in totally different ways to Miller's death, and to the journalists' assertion of responsibility. First Sergeant Sam Williams, the twenty-six-year-old who led the marines and journalists on the mission, offers at least a measure of comfort: "'I know you guys are thinking you got Miller killed.' . . . He seemed a wise old man sitting there, not a line in his face, and we the children. 'It's a war,' he said slowly, like a man as old as time. 'That's what happens in war.'" But Lieutenant Andy Eckert--whom Filkins had previously witnessed cracking under fire, and who was not on the mission--had a different verdict: "Yeah, it was your fault."

IT'S YOUR FAULT. IT'S NOT YOUR FAULT. In a sense, these two sentences sum up the entire experience of war for anyone--civilian, combatant, journalist. One never knows which market to visit (it might be blown up), which weapon to deploy (it might malfunction), which story to pursue (it might get a marine killed). When you make the wrong choice, and somebody dies, is it your fault--or is it simply what happens in war?

Filkins, in any case, gets to the heart of what happens in war. Stylistically he never hits the high notes of, say, *Dispatches* or *A Rumor of War*. But maybe those are unfair benchmarks, from a different conflict and a different time (despite what some people insist, Falluja was no Khe Sanh). And Filkins has his own particular strengths. One of these is the loose structural footing that he employs throughout much of *The Forever War*. At first, this feels like narrative sloppiness and a deficit to the overall fineness of the book. But eventually the

reader recognizes that these waves of action and inaction, of warfare followed by tea, followed by a run, followed by speeding convoy rides with Ahmad Chalabi, often without time or date stamps, are a replica of life at war. They convey the actual biorhythm of combat for soldier and journalist alike.

The author's decision to include coverage of his early years in Afghanistan is prescient, as that country has now returned to the forefront of our "forever war." Americans tend to forget recent history, and the sixty-page primer on the Taliban and the rise of Al Qaeda in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border regions is a shocking reminder of just how far afield the Iraq war took America from real terrorist threats. At the same time, the book is filled with absurd and lovely memories. At one point, the author's trusted translator returns to the scene of a riot to retrieve a pair of Ray-Bans, a gift from another *Times* reporter. At another, Filkins senses trouble when the kebab house where he is dining empties out in a flash, only to realize that the 2006 World Cup is in progress and everyone has rushed home to watch a soccer match.

Filkins saw a lot of the war, and the war saw a lot of him. His admiration for an officer like Captain Omohundro is unwavering. And at the end of this probing and often painful book, the reader senses that if he witnessed the two men on a street in, say, Boston, it would be almost impossible to discern the differences between their burdens.

The Forever War

by **Dexter Filkins**

Knopf

384 pages, \$25