

Book Review

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

by Samantha Power (Penguin Press, 2008)

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On August 19, 2003, agents of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi loaded a Russian-made flatbed truck with half a ton of explosives. At 4:27 p.m., the driver raced it up to the unguarded United Nations headquarters in Baghdad, detonating it beneath the office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General for Iraq. The enormous explosion blew out windows and walls, caused floors to pancake, and ultimately killed two dozen people, among them Sergio Vieira de Mello – who had survived under the rubble for several desperate hours before succumbing. Al Qaeda in Iraq had caught the United Nations by surprise with a devastating attack that some have called the UN's 9/11. The UN lost any remaining innocence that day and accelerated its engagement with the threats posed by transnational terrorist networks.

The friends whom Vieira de Mello cultivated all around the world called him "Sergio," and it seems that everyone this debonair Brazilian met was his friend. He needed all the friends he could find in his unrelenting struggle to staunch the effects of the horrors of revolutions and civil wars. He drank wine with the notorious genocidaire Ieng Sary before repatriating Cambodians who had fled their homeland hoping to avoid

the Khmer Rouge. Bringing a copy of *The New York Review of Books* to Radovan Karadzic, to establish common ground, Sergio struggled to blunt the destruction of Serbia's murderous campaigns in Bosnia. Having obtained support from Sary and Karadzic, he was able to deliver the assistance and otherwise mitigate the horrors of war. In short, he dedicated over 30 years to "passing out sandwiches at the gates of Auschwitz." His life's work and his death offer compelling insights into this thankless task, and Samantha Power is a singularly appropriate chronicler.

A journalist, human rights activist, Harvard professor, and sometime-advisor to Barack Obama, Power comprehends and conveys the charisma, determination, and ability to adapt that marked his career. Her own charms, passion for humanitarian causes, and descriptive powers have garnered her not only front-page attention for her career steps and missteps but also a Pulitzer Prize for her first book, *"A Problem from Hell": America and the Age of Genocide*. Her biography of Sergio may also win prizes for its subject, its insights, and its balance. In it, she argues that rather than being populated by faceless bureaucrats, the UN harnesses the creativity and drive of dedicated public servants who have improved conditions on the ground – not perfectly but admirably.

Along the way, however, she indulges in distracting passages about Sergio's energetic love life, details of his administrative decisions, and even the ditties that his staff composed in his honor. Despite these frolics, *Chasing the Flame* skips over some of the

standard life-and-times elements that would have situated his story more fully in UN history. The book frequently reads like a list of the names, ages, and nationalities of those fortunate enough to have served with him. On the other hand, the chapter dedicated to the day of his murder is gripping and compassionate.

Chasing the Flame does offer valuable and nuanced insights into the development of the UN's humanitarian work. After studying in his native Rio de Janeiro and in Paris, where he was beaten during the protests of May 1968, Sergio joined the UN, working principally for the office of the High Commissioner for Refugees. Over the third of a century that followed, he served in the field in Bangladesh, Sudan, Cyprus, Cambodia, Mozambique, Peru, Lebanon, Bosnia, Serbia, Africa's Great Lakes region, East Timor, and Iraq, as well as in offices in New York and Geneva. Sergio had joined the UN to save the world. But over the course of his life, he lost much of his idealism and learned increasingly to respect power.

In the final chapter, Power distills this intellectual journey into five lessons. First, legitimacy matters: hence Sergio's success in restoring East Timor and the tragic story of the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Second, rogues must be engaged – a conclusion that eventually brought Sergio to support NATO bombardment of Belgrade. Third, fearful people need security. The last of President Franklin Roosevelt's famous "Four Freedoms" came first for a man charged with reassuring and providing for refugees and other victims of aggressive wars. Also, dignity is essential for order; without it people rebel and systems fall apart. And fifth, outsiders must show humility. They cannot have all the answers. The importance of institutional legitimacy, pushing back on bullies, respect for human security and dignity, and a sincere posture of humility constitute valuable lessons, earned from tireless and global experience. They remain as essential for dealing with today's anarchic terrorism as they had for mitigating the nationalist horrors of the twentieth century.