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Fact, Fiction, and Foreign Policy

This is a country that's built on the idea of the future. No city, I believe, is built more on the idea of the future than Los Angeles is, and about the idea of possibilities and looking forward. A lot of the rest of the world doesn't function like that. When you're building your life on the future—even immigrants who come here are looking to the future, they especially are looking to the future—you don't see why you should stop and say, "how do I sort out what's going on in the Middle East? How do I think about what's going on in South America? How do we deal with this unrest in Peru or these shootings in Beirut?" You don't even begin to conceive of the world that way here in America because, at least until 9/11, you didn't have to.

For me as a foreign correspondent—I've been a foreign correspondent for about 25 years now—you can imagine that that was fairly frustrating. I would be writing every day, every week, in *Newsweek* about really traumatic events in different parts of the world. For a while my specialty was to go to places that the United States was about to bomb and be there and watch the bombs come down. I did that more times than I can remember. I think that there's a real problem in the United States—in fact I began to be obsessed by the idea that there was a problem in the United States—with memory, with creating trouble or getting involved in trouble around the world and no one in the United States would seem to recall that it ever happened.

Recently I was talking to a group that included some fairly young kids—middle school children—and I was thinking, "How am I going to reach out to them? How am I going to tell them that they should be interested in the kind of thing that I was talking about?" While I was waiting to stand up and talk I was making notes trying to remember all the military actions and wars that had taken place in the life of a 12 or 13-year old today. I'll read you the list because you won't know off the top of your head, you won't be aware of this. You'll remember them as I read them off: 1989 Panama, 1991 the Gulf War, 1993 Somalia, 1994 Haiti, 1995 Bosnia and the secret war in Iraq, 1999 Kosovo—58 days, 38,000 bombing sorties. Who remembers these wars? We could make the list even longer if we went back to the beginning of the 1980s: 1981 Libya, 1986 Libya, the secret war in Nicaragua—all of these things again and again. Who remembers?

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I knew people didn't remember and I didn't feel that they necessarily should, but I can tell you I was very frustrated by this fact, especially since I was in the middle of these wars. So it became a kind of focus for me to try and imagine ways to break through that barrier of indifference, that tendency to forget that people have. In the mid-1990s, as I became more and more focused on terrorism, I was writing for a country that was less and less interested in the subject.

Overseas we were watching the development of these Arab-Afghan groups that eventually we'd get to know as Al Qaeda. We saw what they were doing, we saw what they were thinking about, we saw the way they were recruiting, we saw their focus on Apocalyptic weapons and the use of those weapons, we knew their hatred for the United States. I wrote about this every chance I could for *Newsweek* or any place else that I could, but I was sure nobody was listening, and not only was I frustrated, but the people I was talking to in the American government were frustrated. You want to see a frustrated guy, a chronicle of frustration, read Richard Clarke's book. Talk to him. He was going crazy and he's not the only one. Everybody who was looking at these issues was saying, "What can we do to break through that barrier of indifference?"

I thought, maybe fiction. Maybe I can write a novel, a thriller that would deal with this, that would try and deal honestly with the kinds of emotions

that were involved, and I started thinking about this especially after looking at the first World Trade Center bombing in 1993. The deeper I got into that, the luckier I thought we were. It had come so close to being such a disaster. Six people were killed, and somehow that became the bottom line

their heads. These were not bright guys. So, it was easy for some people to start to feel really complacent about this, but the more I looked at it the more I thought, “We’re in trouble. Somebody is going to make these things work and something terrible is going to happen, and it isn’t that hard to do.”

Kansas?” And she said, “My parents were from Algeria. They emigrated in the ’50s and I was born and raised there.” I thought, “That’s it.” That’s exactly the truth, isn’t it? There are people from everywhere in America and they have all kinds of backgrounds but we never think about their backgrounds just like we don’t think about the countries that they come from. So the character I created was a kid named Kurt Kurtovic whose family were immigrants from Yugoslavia in the ’50s and who had no particular idea of his background in Yugoslavia and who grew up in Westfield, Kansas—Winfield, Westfield, I thought I’d change it a little bit—since I’ve never actually been to Winfield, Kansas, I didn’t want to get caught out on anything like that. I put this character into play in the fictional events that I was covering in real time as fact to see how he would react and what he would do. His family is kind of a broken family, his father dies when he’s young, his mother is an alcoholic, he joins the Army and becomes a Ranger looking to find his own identity, can’t get his life together. This is, by the way, the classic profile of a terrorist—a guy searching for identity, searching for a cause, searching for a place to belong.

So I sat down and I thought, “Wait a minute. If I start to write about somebody named Mohammed Salameh for an American audience—and maybe this is my own sort of prejudice because I come from the South, but I don’t think so—I think that there is a basic racist

Then after Panama, after the Gulf War, he goes to Yugoslavia to find his roots and what he finds is the war beginning there in its most horrible early stages and he’s recruited. There were a lot of jihadists moving in there, they were attracted like a magnet to Bosnia, just like they’d been attracted to Afghanistan before and Chechnya and Iraq since. One of them recruits him, first to fight in Bosnia and then to do something else, and after a particularly horrible incident this recruiter says to Kurt, “You know about America, don’t you? You know about Americans. They live like people in the middle of a hurricane—all around them there’s death and destruction but

for the American public. Six people were killed? Yes, that was horrible. All that smoke, the picture of the woman coming out of the smoke, turn the page, onward, couldn’t represent anything, just a bunch of almost comic “Keystone” terrorists if you will. The idiot who went back to reclaim the van and got arrested as a result and helped break up the whole group—you remember that? His name is Mohammed Salameh. I went to interview his family in Jordan and every guy in his family—I never met Mohammed Salameh—but every one of his brothers, honest to God, you looked in their eyes you could see right out through the back of

component to the way people read about the Middle East. I think a lot of times when people see a name like Mohammed Salameh or Akhmed or whatever, there’s a click and if you read about how angry Mohammed is or how angry Akhmed is, somehow it doesn’t relate to you any more. It’s not about America. It’s about people over there.

Since I had to have an American central character who comes to identify with that cause, I started to think about this. As it happened, I met a young woman from Winfield, Kansas, and her name was Laila and I said, “How did you get to be named Laila in Winfield,



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they look up and all they see is blue skies. Not until Americans feel the pain and suffering in the rest of the world can there ever be peace in the world.” Now, for a guy like Kurt that’s a persuasive argument. In fact, for a lot of people around the world, I hate to

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say it, that’s a persuasive argument. It’s not an argument you usually hear here, but it’s out there.

So, Kurt is persuaded to come back to the United States and becomes involved with an Apocalyptic terrorist plot to use smallpox virus. We don’t really know where he gets that, we don’t know where the people who give it to him get that, we think maybe they got it from Saddam Hussein, but in the end he doesn’t do it and the first novel ends with him in Westfield, Kansas, again, having quit the plot, having killed the people that were involved in the plot but still with a vial of smallpox virus in his freezer, in his house, wondering if he can ever use it in a way that would change America because he’s an American kid. He thinks, “If I use this it will kill hundreds or thousands of people, most of them children. It would be like the sword of the Angel of Death.” Would that change America forever or would it be like Oklahoma City? Would it become

something else to forget? A soap opera for a while? Something on television people watch and worry about? They feel pity, they feel anger, somebody gets bombed, we turn the page and move on. You’re never sure at the end of that novel whether he’s going to use this stuff or not.

Now, that book was published in 1997. It was written in 1994 and 1995, six years before September 11. When September 11 happened I was in New York and both the people who had bought that novel called me up and said, “Chris, you really knew what was going to go here,” and I said, “Well, not this, but I knew enough to know something like this was going to happen.” So, it’s not surprising that in fact the 9/11 Commission devotes a major segment of one of its key chapters to the question of the failure of imagination in Washington. People didn’t want to imagine, they didn’t want to believe, they didn’t want to conceive of what could happen. It was as if America was immune because of the awe we had created in the world.

In December 2001 I started again to think about what had happened to this character. There’s an interesting thing that happens when you write fiction. I’m sure many of you know screen writers and novelists and writers and you’ve heard them say this, but it is absolutely true, that when you start to write a book about fictional characters there is a moment, if things are working, where they take over, where they’re telling you more about the story maybe than you’re telling them and it is a fascinating process. Obviously, it’s drawing on your own experience, but it’s drawing on your unconscious in ways that you couldn’t tap into in any other fashion. So, I thought it would be interesting to take the same character, Kurt, eight years after the events in *Innocent Blood*, and

start out on September 11, 2001 and see what would happen to him.

Now, I was writing like crazy for *Newsweek* at this point. We were doing cover stories, we were calling everybody, we were in touch with everybody and I had gotten much more deeply into these networks than I had ever been when I was writing *Innocent Blood*. I knew many more people connected to bin Laden, connected to this whole jihadist movement, including the son of one of the founders of it, whom I know very well and I thought, “Well, what would Kurt do?” and I realized that he would have settled down, he would have gotten married, he would have done what, in fact, a lot of terrorists do. When Black September was the most notorious terrorists’ organization of it’s kind, in the 1970s, the Palestinian terrorist organization, secretly organized by Abu Iyad and Yassar Arafat, there was a point when it became a political liability for the PLO to have this Black September connection so Abu Iyad says, “What are we going to do?” and Arafat says, “I don’t know. Shall we kill these guys? Well, maybe. We have to get rid of them somehow.” I think it was Iyad not Arafat, Iyad was the head of intelligence for the PLO who said, “Let’s marry them off. Let’s get them some girls. Let’s let them raise families.” And that’s what they did and those guys dropped out of the terrorism business completely.

So I thought, “Okay. Kurt is living in Westfield. He’s lying low. He thinks he’s okay. Let’s have him be married to somebody he really loves. Let’s have him have a little four-year old girl whom he really loves. Let’s have him be a man who’s put all that behind him, who just wants to forget the terrorism.” But on the morning of September 11 which is the morning that begins the book, when he sees the two towers coming down while he’s toasting Eggos for his

little girl, he knows exactly what happened, and he knows exactly who was behind it, and he knows exactly how dangerous that is. And he knows that he is never going to be safe and he is probably never going to be free unless he does what he is in a unique position to do, which is to take terror to the terrorists because he knows them and he knows the way they work and the way they operate.

So that's the story of *The Sleeper*. I wrote it in real time, I wrote the first 60 percent of the book from December 2001 to March 2002—and as I look at it now I see, and I think you'll see, it's very hard to put down that first 60 percent of the book. It's really hard to put down because it's the rush of emotion, because Kurtovic is doing exactly what I think most of us wish could be done after 9/11—take terror to the terrorists, go after them, eliminate them, kill them, do whatever it takes. But in the middle of the book the moment arises when he realizes that even while he's doing this and some people he's connected with in the government are doing this, there are others who do not want the war to end, other people in America, maybe in the American government, and that's the third book which I haven't written yet.

So, that's the fictional exploration, but of course I deal with these questions as fact all the time. Read my *Shadowland* column which is on the web every week—it's supposed to come out on Tuesdays, sometimes it's Wednesday and sometimes it's Thursday, but it comes out every week. If you read the *Shadowland* column you'll see that it is a very sharp appraisal every week of what's going on in the world, not only of terrorism, but of the war in Iraq, and the Middle East generally. I get a lot of e-mails

about it and I average about 100, sometimes 500-600 e-mails, within hours of the column appearing. I try to read all of them and it is an amazing picture of a world but especially a nation, the United States, divided over the events of the last four years. It's one of the reasons that I like to do a

two weeks after Bush landed on the aircraft carrier. I was at the bar at the airport and there were like ten television screens—and they were all on sports

tour like this because I like to go around and I want to listen to what people have to say, see people face to face, not just read sometimes passionate, sometimes passionately insulting, e-mails and get an impression of what's going on in the United States.

I think we've reached a critical moment where people are more interested than they have ever been. They might like to go back to forgetting about the rest of the world, but they can't—they know they can't. It keeps reaching out and grabbing them. With 140,000 Americans in Iraq nobody believes it's going to be possible to forget Iraq or forget them. We certainly should not forget them any time soon.

Just one last thought. Politically, there was always the assumption that Americans would forget, even in the middle of the war. I happened to be in

Raleigh-Durham Airport, North Carolina two weeks after President Bush landed on the aircraft carrier. I was having a catfish sandwich, I remember, at the bar at the airport and I look up and there were like ten television screens—and they were all on sports. I had just been in Iraq and was going back, and I'm thinking, "We're still in Iraq. We have lots of people in Iraq and it's not a happy place."

I asked the woman who was behind the bar, "How come you've got all those TV screens on sports and there's no news?" and she had a kind of North Carolina accent, she's one of those southerners who every statement sounds like a question, and she said, "Well, you know during the war we had all those screens on the war and on the news but it was kind of depressing and people didn't feel really good about it and then President Bush landed on that aircraft carrier and the very next day the boss called up and he said 'you can put them all back on ESPN.'" That was a political judgment. That was why President Bush landed on the aircraft carrier and you can see again and again that signals were sent out by the administration saying, "Time to change the channel. You can change the channel because we've caught Saddam. You can change the channel because there's a new administrative law. You can change the channel because we've set a date for the transfer of sovereignty, you can change the channel because we have transferred sovereignty. You can change the channel because we're going to have elections, soon it will be because we've had elections and you can keep changing and please change the channel." But you can't change the channel; you keep having to change back, because the situation just gets worse and worse and worse.

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