

Q: Why did you write THE FOREVER WAR, and why did you choose that title?

Whenever I went home to the U.S., people would ask me: what's it like over there? What does it feel like? What's it like to be shot at? What's it like to be woken up by a car bomb? What's it like to sleep in a village with no electricity? How do you talk to a warlord? Hence my book: I want to show people what it feels like to be in Iraq and Afghanistan: the ambiguity, the heartbreak, the fear and the joy. It's a visceral book, not really an intellectual one.

As for the title, I should say: the book makes no argument. It is very explicitly not a political book. The title, "The Forever War," is more metaphor than literal truth. (At least I hope it is). The first chapter of the book takes place in 1998, at the Kabul Sports Stadium, at a public execution carried out by the Taliban on a Friday afternoon. It's 2008 now, and we are still at war. I've expended much of my life's energies in those wars. Many of us have. It already feels like forever, and it isn't even over yet.

Q: There are less dangerous posts to be had in the world of reporting—why did you choose to go to Afghanistan and Iraq?

There is a saying about the sea; you don't really know it until you've seen it during a storm. The same is true of men and women, I think. In war, people find themselves in extraordinary circumstances, and in those circumstances they act in extraordinary ways. In war, you see people at their very best and their very worst, acting in ways you could never imagine. War is human drama at its most epic and most intense.

Q: You were based in Afghanistan in 1998, long before it was really in the news as far as many Americans were concerned. What was it like, reporting from such a war-torn, almost forgotten place? Were there many other journalists there, or did you feel a bit like the Lone Ranger?

It was a very strange time. The Taliban were so weird; it was like they were from another century, another galaxy. In those days I was just mystified by Afghanistan—what it was, where it was going. Any Westerner who was there—reporters or aid workers; we were about the only ones—felt exactly the same way. What the hell is this? Where is it going? We could tell things there were going bad, that they were headed toward some terrible end. We just knew; we could feel it. Once, I think it was in the summer of 2000—I actually told my editors back home: "Something really bad is going to happen here." But of course I didn't know what. When the planes hit the towers on September 11, it all came together.

Q: You write that the Iraqis had "two conversations" – one amongst themselves and another where they'd "tell the Americans what they wanted to hear" so they'd go away and the Iraqis could get on with their lives. This must have made your reporting complicated. How were you able to determine who to trust?

I was a fly on the wall. That's all a reporter really is. As a result, in Iraq, I was often privy to many things that American officials or American soldiers never saw. I'd be standing there, for instance, watching an Iraqi guy tell some American soldiers something and then, when the soldiers had walked away, say something totally different to his friends. And I'd be standing right there. You can do that if you're a reporter. I didn't have a

uniform on. I didn't have a gun or a checkbook. It was extraordinary, the things I witnessed.

Also, I should say: I could never have understood the first thing about Iraq without the Iraqis I worked with, Jaff and Razzaq and Waleed. They were brave and smart and savvy and tireless, and they were friends. We were very close; we trusted one another. They told me everything.

Q: You spent a lot of time face to face with Ahmad Chalabi, and you write that he was someone you "never missed a chance to follow around" and that "Chalabi was Iraq." What about him was so fascinating? How was he emblematic of the country itself?

Chalabi is extraordinary. If you were a novelist you could not—you would not—invent him. He is brilliant and unreliable and mysterious and funny and very, very fast. And, whatever I thought of him, he was important. He was in the middle of everything. I could not have been a responsible reporter had I ignored him; I just needed to be careful.

And yes: Iraq was Chalabi and Chalabi was Iraq—mercurial and manic and many-layered—all those things. He was the essence of the place.

Q: You must have strong opinions about the war on terror, and both the Iraq war and the way in which operations in Afghanistan have been conducted. Yet the book is almost apolitical. Why?

I think we've all heard our share of arguments about these wars. We've all heard a lot of moralizing—who was right and who was wrong. I'm exhausted by it; I think probably most people are. But in a deeper sense, I think much of the moralizing we've heard is self-indulgent. Moralizing is something you get to do from a TV studio, what someone at a cocktail party gets to do. If you are actually in Iraq or Afghanistan, you don't get a chance to do a lot of that. People are dying. If my book is about anything, it's about the reality on the ground. Down there, politics is irrelevant.

Q: Reporting from Iraq, you met many well-known people, like Chalabi and Bremer, but many whose names won't be familiar to readers. Who among them stick out in your mind? Are you still in touch with servicemen and women you were embedded with, or any Iraqis you met there?

Yeah. There are a lot of people I'm still in touch with. Just yesterday, for instance, I got an email from Sam Williams, a 26-year-old sergeant from Northern Michigan who is on his fourth tour in Iraq. (Get that: twenty six and on his fourth tour in Iraq.) Sam's an amazing guy; he lead me out of a terrible situation in 2004, where, but for him, I probably would have died.

Then there's Farid Yusufzai. He was a translator for me in Afghanistan in 2000, when I was arrested and expelled by the Taliban. He was beaten and imprisoned and he escaped. I helped him get to the U.S. He's a physician now in Atlanta. Incredible guy.

Q: You are a dedicated runner and regularly ran while based in Baghdad, which was risky and often unbearably hot. Do you think being out like that—off duty,

doing something that many Iraqis thought was a little crazy—wound up giving you a different perspective on things?

Well, it WAS crazy. I was still running in 2006, when Baghdad was in a state of total anarchy. It was reckless, but I needed to do it to stay sane. I couldn't have stayed otherwise. In Iraq, especially in the really bad times, we were cooped up a lot—in a car, in people's homes, in our bureau, darting from one interview to another. When I ran, I felt free.

Q: You have said that "the further you are away from Iraq, the more decisive you are... if you've spent any time on the ground there, you're not too sure of anything." Have you found yourself becoming more decisive about things over the year and a half you've been back?

First all, it's true. Any American who has spent time in Iraq or Afghanistan will tell you: the closer you get, the less certain you are of anything. If you are in Iraq, if you are in Afghanistan, everything is ambiguous. Everything is murky and gray and uncertain and possibly lethal. You are constantly asking yourself if what you are seeing is real, if it is what you think it is, if it will last. And then you go back to the hotel and turn on the TV, and some retired colonel in a studio in New York is telling you what happened in Iraq today. And if you disagree with him you are a traitor and a fool. Really, it's jarring.

Am I more opinionated now that I have been away? No, I don't think so. In 2006, when I left Baghdad, Iraq was collapsing and Afghanistan was on the mend. Today, the reverse is true. There is just no predicting what's going to happen in these places.

Q: What are your thoughts on the surge—has it worked? Was it the "right" course of action? What do you think the future holds for the United States in Iraq?

Well, this is something I actually do feel strongly about. I wasn't sure that the surge would work, but I thought it was worth a try. I felt we owed to the Iraqis. We toppled Saddam, after all, and we made so many mistakes in the aftermath that helped send the country into its tailspin. By late 2006, the country was headed toward the abyss. So I thought we owed to the Iraqis to stick it out and get it right. And it's worked—at least for the time being. The violence is down dramatically. I'm in Iraq right now and the changes are just extraordinary. I can barely recognize the place.

Will it last? I hope so. But I won't make a prediction about Iraq. That's a fool's game.